JOURNEY TO INFINITY

Adventures in Science Fiction Series

Men Against the Stars
Edited by Martin Greenberg
Introduction by Willy Ley

Journey to Infinity
Edited by Martin Greenberg
Introduction by Fletcher Pratt

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Edited by
MARTIN GREENBERG

Introduced by
FLETCHER PRATT

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FOREWORD

In the first Gnome Press anthology in the planned series of "adventures in science fiction" there was one thought in mind which motivated its publication. This second book represents a continuation of that idea. The first paragraph of the Foreword in that first book expressed the purpose so clearly, we believe, that it is worthy of repetition here. "This book was planned from the very beginning to be more than just a collection of interesting adventure stories. It was organized around a central idea, one theme which moves logically from story to story. By building upon this unifying theme, we who prepared this book sincerely believe, a new idea in science fiction anthologies has been developed—a science fiction anthology which, taken in its entirety, tells a complete story."

The central idea in this latest book concerns Mankind itself. Whereas the first in the series dealt with a phase in the life of Man, specifically interplanetary spaceships and space travel, these stories together consider the development of humanity and its culture as a whole. Science fiction writers have always concerned themselves with the direction in which the civilization of Earth is heading; likewise they have, with imaginative soarings, searched the past for clues to our inheritance. From their collective minds we have assembled what may well be called "a future history of Mankind," together with some appropriate background material to round out the picture.

Fletcher Pratt, noted as an historian and himself a writer of science fiction, has contributed an introduction which analyzes and develops the central theme. His remarks add a great deal to the coherency of this volume. In addition, his sympathetic discussion of the underlying principles around which science fiction is written ought to increase understanding among those to whom this is a new field of literature.

Martin Greenberg

INTRODUCTION

by Fletcher Pratt

SCIENCE FICTION is unique among the modern groupings of literature in that the anthology is perhaps its most typical form. Not that there are no book-length novels in the field. There are some extremely good ones; but the method and material of science fiction lend themselves peculiarly well to the short story. The writer of science fiction is and must be concerned with the reactions of human beings in environments which, either by time or circumstance, are strikingly different from the world in which we spend our daily lives. If that writer elaborates the picture of his imagined world in every last logical detail, he risks losing track of the individual people he is writing about. That is, he turns out a treatise instead of a story; and in fact much book-length science fiction is more science than fiction, Bellamy's *Looking Backward* being a famous example. The writer who is really telling a story can normally afford only a glimpse of the different world in which his tale is laid, enough to indicate its main lines and why it is provided with pleasures, duties and perils unlike those that normally surround us.

Moreover, science fiction appears largely in magazines for the first time, and the modern American magazine reader has established his perfectly reasonable repugnance to being bothered either with very long stories or losing the thread of a type of story that always requires rather close reading while waiting for the next issue to come out. The short story has thus come to dominate the field of science fiction, and it is not surprising that various people have found many short stories too good to be left gathering dust in piles of back number magazines.

But these same rescuers-from-oblivion generally operate on the theory that it is enough if a story be both good and science fiction. The collections normally represent nothing but their editors' preference for a group of wholly unrelated stories. To this generalization the Spring of 1950 produced a brilliant exception—*Men Against the Stars,* edited by Martin Greenberg. The same editor now gives us another anthology with a genuine idea behind it.

This time it is the history of the world; not the history of the world as dealt with by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and taught in the colleges, but the kind of history we cannot actually know, only view through the efforts of controlled scientific imagination. Or perhaps imagination is the wrong word when associating with science. Extrapolation, the prolonging of a thoroughly established curve to discover the end product of a known movement is a perfectly legitimate scientific technique.

In this group of stories, then, the reader is presented with a series of extrapolations about the history of the Earth. It is by no means entirely extrapolation into the future, for in the first two stories of the collection we are living at the end of the curve and the authors have run back along it to see where we might have come from.

One rather remarkable fact about these stories is that, although they are the work of many different hands, they might almost have had their origin in a single mind—or group of minds in agreement on essentials. One can accept the picture of the world in any of these stories, one can agree that current progress will one day carry us to the point at which the story takes place, without invalidating anything that has gone before in the book or anything that will come later. No doubt it represents a rather adroit piece of editing for such a result, but it is rather worth asking whether editing alone is responsible—whether it is not significant that among practitioners of the controlled scientific extrapolation there is such general agreement as to the probable development of the civilization of Man.

We know that predictors of the future can be as wildly wrong as H. G. Wells when he had the war in the air fought out by gigantic fleets of hydrogen-filled balloons. But the point is that Wells' balloons were merely a technical detail; there was a growing accumulation of evidence to indicate that he may have been quite right about the overall effects of prolonged and violent aerial warfare. So it may well be with these stories. The exact nature of an invention cannot usually be predicted, because if it could be, the thing would be invented instead of extrapolated; but the precise details are unimportant beside the indicated general trend of development. If the authors represented in this anthology have caught that, then the reader really has here before him something like the overall history of the world.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD 5

INTRODUCTION *Fletcher Pratt* 7

FALSE DAWN *A. Bertram Chandler* 15

ATLANTIS *Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.* 49

LETTER TO A PHOENIX *Fredric Brown* 63

UNITE AND CONQUER *Theodore Sturgeon* 71

BREAKDOWN *Jack Williamson* 110

DANCE OF A NEW WORLD *John D. MacDonald* 145

MOTHER EARTH *Isaac Asimov* 159

THERE SHALL BE DARKNESS *C. L. Moore* 196

TABOO *Fritz Leiber* 248

OVERTHROW *Cleve Cartmill* 259

BARRIER OF DREAD *Judith Merril* 312

METAMORPHOSITE *Eric Frank Russell* 324

JOURNEY TO INFINITY

Deep in the debris of time are hidden the forgotten cultures of Man. Only whispered legends come to us now of the glories of Lur, Candra, Thragan, Kah, Mu, Attrin, Hyboria and Atlantis. Of these, Attrin is the earliest whose history might be pieced together, based upon present day evidence indicating its actual existence. What it was and what happened to it is related here as the first part of the imaginary history of Mankind.

FALSE DAWN

by A. Bertram Chandler

ANGAM MATANGU stood with his two mates on the flat roof of his house on the outskirts of Darnala. The summer air was heavy with the scent of the night-flowering shrubs that grew in profusion in the garden below, and flaunted their pallid, faintly luminous blossoms from the plot in the center of the wide expanse of roof. The stars hung low in the warm sky. To the east was a growing, spreading pallor—a light wan and ghostly in contrast to the live, pulsing stars, the sparse, ruddy-burning lamps irregularly spaced along the thoroughfares of the city.

"The dawn," said Evanee, the younger of the women.

Linith laughed shortly, scornfully. This was not the first time that she had arisen early with her mate, left her bed to stand here on the rooftop to await the rising of Loana. She knew that the eastern light would fade again, that with its passing what little remained of the dark night would be even darker. Then would come the real dawn —and Ramanu, Lord of Life, would flood the world with his golden light.

"The dawn," said Evanee again, a faint yet sharp edge of irritation in her voice.

"No, my dear." It was Angam who spoke, his voice gentle as always. "The false dawn. But Loana will not be long—"

The two women seated themselves upon a low seat running the inner perimeter of the parapet. Angam remained standing, statuesque in the darkness, bulking big in the robe he had donned against the slight morning chill. Watching him, Linith wondered what strange compulsion it was that brought him out on these mornings when Loana rose just a little before the sun, when the little sister world presented only a slim crescent to the eyes of her watchers. She pondered the essential unwisdom of the male. She was moved to share her thoughts with the younger woman—then abruptly decided against it. She, Evanee, would learn. This now was very romantic. Linith had found it so the first few times. But when you had seen the young Loana, the ghost of the old Loana clasped in her arms, rise once before the dawn you had seen it for all time. She stifled a yawn. You could always see the same thing just after sunset at the beginning of the month—even though the hills inland did shut the sight from view all too soon.

"Loana!" said Angam suddenly, a note almost of reverence in his deep voice. "Loana!"

Evanee jumped to her feet and ran to his side. Linith rose slowly, not without dignity, her manner conveying just a hint of boredom. She was almost wishing that she had let Evanee come up here alone with Angam. Almost— But even the sacrifice of a lazy morning was better than being relegated to the contemptible status of so many senior wives of her acquaintance.

And even she had to admit to feeling a faint thrill as the slender crescent climbed out and up from the low, dark clouds along the sea's eastern rim, trailing in its wake the first flush of the true dawn. And even she wondered, for the thousandth time, what was the nature of the beings who lived in the cities whose twinkling lights were spread in clusters over the night hemisphere. And she wondered why those lights, year by year, month by month, were thinning as the leaves of a tree are thinned by the onset of autumn, the first, chill blasts heralding the coming of winter. From nowhere a sentence formed itself in her mind—*The lights are going out one by one.* "The lights are going out one by one," she said aloud. "Tell me, Angam, shall we see them relit in our time?"

From the direction of the airport came a certain noise of shouting, distinctly audible in the still air, the dawn hush. Presently the northbound mail soared overhead, its gas bag a huge shadow against the stars, the whine of its turbines, the throb of its propellers disturbing the birds in the trees below. With its passing they ceased their indignant outcry—but before Linith could ask her question again Evanee broke the fresh woven spell of silence.

"I read a story," she said, "about an airship that was filled with a gas many times lighter than helium, than hydrogen even. And it went up to Loana—"

Linith, although Angam's face was invisible to her, could almost see his tolerant smile as he replied to the feather-brained little fool.

"Just a story, Evanee. It couldn't be done. It will never be done. Even the heavier than air flying machine that Mang is working on now could never do it. You see, between ourselves and Loana there is no atmosphere, no air. And we must have air so that our balloons may float like corks in water, so that the wings of the new airships may have something against which to beat. The most we can hope for is that some day they will answer our light signals. I wonder," he said slowly, "what they are really like. Are they men and women like us? Or are they—things? But their life must be grim and hard. Loana has no air, and so they must live out their lives in their sealed cities under their air-tight domes." His sweeping gesture included all the world with its fields and seas, its snow-covered mountains and verdant valleys. "They haven't anything like this!"

"And their lights are going out one by one," said Linith.

As he drove to his place of work Angam found his vague forebodings of the dawn swiftly dispelled by the glory of the morning. He wondered why he should feel that the fate of his kind was linked up with that of the unknown, unguessable people of Loana. Their lights were going out one by one. He remembered the grave intonation of Linith's voice as she said it, and a shiver ran over his body, made every hair of the ruddy pelt covering his body stand briefly on end. Absentmindedly he returned the salutation of the driver of a car bound in the opposite direction, then bent all his attention to the business of nursing his power. He had let his reserve fall perilously low.

Yet he could not prevent his attention from wandering to his surroundings. The wide, clean road, the low houses on either side, each standing within its own garden, each half hidden by and blending with the luxuriant trees and shrubs, told him that this was a good world to be alive in. The throngs of cheerful people, afoot and awheel, confirmed him in this belief. Ramanu gilded their warm-tinted pelts with his mellow rays, struck scintillant fire from the jeweled ornaments worn by men and women alike. Truly, thought Angam, this is a good world and we are a good people. We—fit. There is no strife among us as among the beasts. Each has ample. And yet—we are not too far removed from our four-footed brothers and sisters. Our feet are planted firm on the good earth. We are of the earth.

Round the bend of the road glowed the orange pillar of a power station. Angam glanced at his gauges, cut his engine and silently coasted the last few yards. The attendant, aproned, gauntleted, hurried out from his little hut at the musical summons of Angam's horn.

"Angam Matangu!" he said. "Salutation!"

"Salutation, Morrud. I have all but exhausted my power."

"Truly, Angam Matangu, none would guess that you stored power for the city. Many a time have I had to carry your cylinders a full ten yards from my hut to your car. Perhaps"—a sly smile flickered over the broad, pleasant countenance—"you are too interested in the source of your power to care overmuch for the power itself."

"Perhaps you are right. Morrud."

Angam leaned back in his seat, took his ease whilst the other went to the back of the vehicle, took therefrom the four compressed air cylinders, three empty and one almost so, that powered the efficient little engine of his car. As he had done many a time before he wondered whether or not it might be better to utilize the steam turbine for intramural transport, as already it was used for vehicles outside the city limits. But perhaps the city fathers were right. The compressed air motors made up for their minor inconveniences by a complete absence of smoke, heat or fumes. He tried to imagine what Darnala would be like were each car a source of such irritations.

Morrud returned with the fresh cylinders. Deftly he stowed them in their positions, made the necessary connections.

"Warranted full pressure," he grinned. "After all, they bear your seal." Abruptly gravity fell on him like a cloak. "I watched Loana this morning. The lights are going out one by one. Tell me, Angam Matangu, what is it? Are they dying up there? Is their power failing fast so that they must economize? They say that there is no air, no water, that life is possible only in their sealed cities. And, city by city, the life is going out of Loana. Tell me, Angam Matangu, will the same fate overtake us in the end?"

"In the end, Morrud. But that will not be for millions of years. And perhaps we shall have learned some way of holding off the cold and the dark." He drew a pencil from his pouch, initialed the slip of paper that the attendant presented to him, opened his valve and drove off. And it seemed to him that the death of Loana, whatever that death might be, was casting its shadow over all the city of Darnala, over all the kindly, happy land of Attrin.

It was not until he arrived at the power storage plant that Angam was able to shake off his pointless, uneasy foreboding. But here, surrounded by the familiar routine of his profession, the materials and tools of his trade, he was almost able to forget the beings who, unknown, unknowable close neighbors in space, were face to face with the doom that must some day overtake all the worlds. He wished briefly that there were some way of sending the cylinders of compressed air filled by the slow, inexorable upthrust of the tide-actuated rams—then pushed the impossible desire out of his mind as he was called to deal with a blown valve at the head of one of the great cylinders.

But the thought refused to be disposed of so easily. All the time that Angam was working he was contrasting his lot, cast among a plenitude of air and water, with that of those who lived—and who were now dying—upon Loana. He wondered what conditions were like on that little, senile world. His imagination, vivid though it was, was unequal to the task.

He made the last connection.

"Shut her down, Carran," he ordered his subordinate. The master valve atop the great cylinder head spun rapidly, the noise of escaping air rose octaves in pitch, from a low whistle to a barely audible hiss, then ceased. Through the smaller valves the compressed air poured into the bottles. Gauge needles flickered and crept to their maxima, valves were shut and metal flasks sent to join the long line of their identical twins on the chute to the warehouse. It was all part of a normal working day at the Darnala power storage plant. It was power, it was air compressed by the rising waters. And on the prime source of that power, on the world whose gravitational pull sent the tidal waves sweeping from ocean to ocean, the air and water were almost gone.

Angam dipped his hands into a container of alcohol, agitated them until every trace of grease was washed from the close, ruddy fur. He dried them upon a clean piece of fabric. Then, hands clasped behind his back, he padded on broad, bare feet through his domain. Save for the occasional hiss of escaping air, the occasional plash of agitated water, it was very quiet. The row of tall, black cylinders, inside which the rams were rising with the rising tide, dwarfed the workers around their bases. A man of another age, another species, would have compared the atmosphere with that of a cathedral—but such a concept would have been incomprehensible to Angam and his fellows. True—they worshiped Ramanu, Lord of Life, in their fashion, but it was a fashion that recognized the need for ritual whilst refusing any belief in the supernatural.

The big clock on the landward wall of the plant, its polished weights gleaming dully in the subdued light, marked the tenth hour. Somewhere, somebody pulled a lanyard. A deep, boomingly melodious whistle told all Darnala that the sun was at the meridian, that this was the hour of the midday meal. All but the few who would tend the simple machinery whilst their workmates dined were streaming from the plant. Angam found Carran, assured himself that the other was conversant with all that was happening, then followed his underlings out into the blaze of noonday heat and light. He paused at the parking lot, undecided whether or not to take his car and run home, there to enjoy his midday meal with his two wives. He decided against it. They would not be expecting him. He should have dispatched a messenger earlier in the forenoon. Which reminded him—his messenger bill for the last month was far too high.

On foot he sauntered along the waterfront to the eating house kept by one Lagan.

He found Mollin Momberig, manager of the pottery, in Lagan's. It was often said that you would find there the executives of all the industries clustered around the harbor and the tidal power plants. The cooking was good and the prices were a little higher than those of the usual run of such places. High enough, in fact, to discourage those of the lower income levels. Equalitarian though society was it was recognized that equality of taste, behavior, conversational standards is impossible of attainment.

Momberig was seated in one of the little booths, a bowl of soup and a pitcher of light wine before him. He saw Angam enter, peer around in the rather dim lighting as he searched for a familiar face. Momberig raised his hand and called in his rather high pitched voice —"Angam! Angam Matangu! Will you honor me?"

"The honor is mine," replied Angam.

He took his seat opposite the other, looked with appreciation at the waitress as she brought the bill of fare. He wondered if that peculiar shade of gold were natural. Natural or not—its effect was striking. He watched the girl as she threaded her way among the tables, her muscles moving smoothly under the blond, silky pelt.

"I must come here more often, Mollin," he said.

Mollin laughed. "You might get away with it with Evanee—she doesn't know you yet. But Linith— Oh, by the way, what *does* Evanee think of your Loana gazing?"

Angam grinned, showing his big, strong teeth.

"She thinks it very romantic," he said.

But his smile wasn't all good humor. There was bitterness there—the bitterness of a man when he finds that a loved one does not, cannot take seriously those things which to him are of the utmost importance.

"Of course, she's young—" he concluded.

Mollin pushed away his empty soup bowl, began vigorously to attack the crusty bread and strong cheese.

"I watched Loana this morning," he remarked in a sputter of crumbs. "The lights are going out, one by one."

"You know Handrin," said Angam pensively. "What does *he* make of it?"

"What *could* he make of it? All that he's concerned with is turning out ephemerae for the seamen. He wouldn't care if Loana were made of green cheese as long as she kept to her proper orbit, as long as the bold mariners were able to navigate their ships with her aid. Talking of mariners . . . ahoy, captain. Join us in a pitcher of Tironian wine!"

From out the adjoining booth a short, more than normally thickset figure was making his way to the door. He hesitated, then retraced his steps to where Angam and Mollin were sitting. Angam studied him with interest, decided that he liked the man. Two pale-gray eyes from beneath heavy brows regarded him steadily. The facial hair, and that of the body, was graying—yet there was an impression of youth. And the heavy gold bracelet on each wrist denoted the wearer's rank.

"Captain Noab," introduced Mollin. "Angam Matangu, manager of the power storage plant." The two men bowed. "You know what we were talking about, captain?" the master potter went on. "The city lights on Loana. What do you think is happening?"

The mariner waited until the blonde had brought him his pitcher of wine. He drank long and appreciatively. Then—

"I've watched Loana," he rumbled. "I've looked long at those city lights, wondered what it would be like if we had ships that could get up there. And when those lights started going out one by one—why, it was like losing old friends."

"But what is happening?"

"I don't know, gentlemen. But I have my own—theories. Perhaps the people of Loana are like some of the 'people' aboard our ships. They are not nice people to know. Now that the air is thin, now that the water can be counted by drops, they are fighting each other for what little remains."

"Fighting? But that's impossible! They must be at least as civilized as ourselves. And surely, under those conditions, they would band together and attempt to stave off doom by common effort."

"Yes. If they were like us. But are they? You landlubbers don't get to know rats as we seamen do. In spite of all we can do to exterminate them they still infest our ships. They are not unintelligent. If—Ramanu forbid—they should ever band together it would go hard with us, the human crew. But they are incurably vicious. They fight among themselves. They live on a plane of sheer savagery undreamed of by us or, indeed, by the big majority of our four-footed brethren."

Mollin's face was incredulous. "You mean that the people of Loana are—rats?" he managed at last.

"No. But I do mean that most of us have been far too prone to think of them as people like ourselves. But it seems to me that those city lights are going out, one by one, because those living in the cities are grappled in a dreadful struggle for the last drop of water, the last lungful of air. Working with one common end in view they might save themselves. But they are sealing the doom of themselves and their world."

Angam looked up at the clock. Its big hand marked one quarter of an hour to the eleventh hour. He rose to his feet.

"I must go," he said. "My assistant awaits his relief."

"I will come with you," said Mollin. He signaled to the blond waitress, initialed with a pencil from his pouch the bill that she presented. Noab leading they emerged from the eating house into the early afternoon sunshine.

Angam had noted the captain's ship on his way to his meal. She could hardly escape notice. Perhaps to a seaman's practiced eye there were many details in which she differed from the smaller coastwise craft berthed all around her, but size alone made her stand out like a mastodon in a herd of bison. Her clean, russet painted hull and buffcolored upper-works were pleasing to the eye—yet she was so well designed that even had she been painted a drab, uniform gray her perfect lines would still have been a delight.

High above the covered-in bridge towered the tall funnel, dull crimson, and on it, in gold, a rampant lion. From the lofty masts depended the derricks, idle now during the meal hour, and piled high upon the quay, awaiting shipment, were cases and casks and bales of merchandise.

"You have a fine ship, Captain Noab," said Angam. "Tell me, when does *Arrak* sail?"

"It has not yet been decided. The stores and cargo should be aboard tomorrow. But I believe there is still some delay in the selection of the colonists."

"I should have liked to have come with you. They will need tidal engineers in this new land to the westward. "But—"

"Angam is a much married man, captain," put in Mollin.

"Yes. You know what women are."

"I do," replied Noab. "That is why I have never married. But call aboard, Mollin Momberig, some time when you are free. And you too, Angam Matangu. We will drink a pitcher of wine together!"

It was barely four weeks later.

Angam Matangu stood with his two mates on the flat roof of his house on the outskirts of Darnala. The summer air was heavy with the scent of the night-flowering shrubs that grew in profusion in the garden below, that flaunted their pallid, faintly luminous blossoms from the plot in the center of the wide expanse of roof. The stars hung low in the warm sky. To the east was a growing, spreading pallor—a light wan and ghostly in contrast to the live, pulsing stars, the sparse, ruddy-burning lamps irregularly spaced along the thoroughfares of the city.

Yet, in spite of the warmth, there was more than a suggestion of autumn in the air. Mixed with the scent of the flowers was a subtle hint of overripeness, of sweet decay. There was the dim foreknowledge that soon would come the cold gales from the north, that soon the trees and the flowering shrubs would stand stripped to the cold rains, that the lesser plants would be beaten down to the earth from which they had sprung.

But this morning the air was calm.

From the rooftops of adjoining houses came a whispering, a murmuring. Once, almost alone in Darnala, Angam had kept his vigil. Now it seemed that all the city had arisen early to await the rising of Loana.

For the lights of the little sister world were now almost all gone. But one city remained—and all along its outskirts flashed and blazed other lights—evanescent, briefly flaring, somehow menacing.

Angam thought of Captain Noab and his rats. Once he had visualized the people of Loana as beings not unlike himself—now he saw them as things small and active and evil with sharp teeth and rending claws.

But those lights—

The idea of a weapon was foreign to Angam's people. True—their cattle herders in remote districts carried spears as a protection for themselves and their charges against the great cats—but beyond that they had not gone. Vegetarians as they were they were never hunters. Their herds supplied them with milk and cheese—but meat was an unknown diet to them.

But those lights—

Could it be, thought Angam, that they were using some kind of blasting powder against their fellows? Once he had seen the results of a premature burst in a quarry—even now the memory brought nausea. But his engineer's mind could conceive how—if it were imperative to kill one's fellows—explosives could be utilized. A metal tube, for example, sealed at one end and with a little ball or rod working within it like a piston, expelled by the force of the explosion. Or a metal ball filled with blasting powder and with a slow-burning fuse. It could be thrown at one's enemies. . . .

Linith rose from her seat on the parapet and walked to his side. She slipped her arm inside his, said nothing. She was very comforting.

Evanee got up, too. She hurried across to where her husband and his first wife were standing, made haste to possess herself of his free arm.

"Why do you worry about Loana?" she pouted. "It's miles away. Nothing that happens there can possibly affect *us.*"

"Yes, but—"

"What was it that Captain Noab was saying the night we had dinner aboard *Arrak?*" interrupted Linith. "Wasn't it that this was like being aboard a big, well-found ship, standing by some smaller vessel foundering in a storm and being unable to raise a finger to help?"

"Yes," replied Angam. "That's just what it *is* like, Linith. Can't you see, Evanee? There are people there. They may be like us—they most probably are not. They have hopes and fears like us. And loves—"

"And hates," said Linith somberly.

"So you believe in old Noab's wild theory."

"Don't you?"

From the airport came a flashing of lights, a shouting, an orderly confusion. Released from its moorings the northbound mail floated up, a vast, black bulk against the stars. But there was no whine of turbines, no threshing of screws. The airship rose almost vertically, a distant splashing noise telling of the jettison of water ballast. It seemed that her pilots, too, had sensed that this rising of Loana would be momentous, were determined that neither they nor their passengers would miss whatever spectacle was to be unfolded before their wondering and horrified eyes. The people of Attrin could do nothing to help their close, unknown neighbors in space—but the mere fact that they would be silent, helpless witnesses of the death of a world gave them the sense of an obligation fulfilled.

Along the eastern horizon were low, dense clouds. A slight paling of the blackness above them gave brief warning of the rising of Loana. The silver crescent showed first the merest tip of one of its horns, just a single point of light over the dark sea. The point became a triangle, the triangle a scimitar. Then Loana in her entirety ruled briefly the eastern heavens. The ghost of the new Loana shone wanly within the half encircling rim of brilliance. And this pale, reflected light on the dark side was almost the only illumination. Just one little cluster of pin points of radiance remained, lost and lonely in the expanse of darkness.

"The last city," said Linith. "The last bastion against the everlasting night."

Last bastion it may have been—and even to these distant watchers it was obvious that it was suffering assault. Around its perimeter could be seen a continual flickering, briefly flaring flames that, even at this extreme range, seemed to sear the retina. Abruptly fully half of the remaining city lights went out.

Then it happened.

The tiny luminosities seemed to fuze, to coalesce. For an infinitesimal fraction of a moment there was complete darkness—and then the whole of Loana spouted flame. An intolerable radiance swept over the little world. Not one of those watching saw the last act of the distant tragedy played out to its conclusion. The light was of a brightness too intense to be borne, brighter than the torrents of fire sweeping down the sky during a summer thunderstorm, brighter than Ramanu at the meridian. Every detail of Darnala was thrown into sharp relief. The startled birds in the trees set up a fear-crazed chattering. And the sea to the east threw back the light from the sky so that all must either close their eyes or turn their faces inland.

Evanee uttered a low cry, a little scream. She fell to the rooftop, heavily. Angam bent over her, all anxious solicitude. But it was Linith who took charge.

"Can't you see?" she said. "It was the shock. I'll look after her. Hurry and get the doctor!"

Angam straightened. Even now he could not resist the urge to take one last look at the sky. But there was nothing to be seen. A warm, gusty wind had arisen and was blustering through the widely spaced houses. The sky was overcast. And from the southward came a continual flickering of lightning and dull grumbling of thunder. And it was very hot. His pelt was damp with perspiration, and beneath it his skin prickled with an almost unendurable irritation.

"Shall I help you down with her?" he asked.

"No. I'll manage. But you might put the lights on and start some water heating on your way to the street."

In Evanee's bedroom Angam flicked with his thumb the lever of her table lamp. The spark caught at once, there were a few seconds of hissing and spluttering and then the incandescent mantle passed swiftly from red heat to a soft, white light. In the kitchen the boiler gave no trouble. Nevertheless he assured himself, before going out, that the oil reservoir was full. He felt rather proud of his levelheadedness.

Outside his street door he seized the clapper of the bell that would summon the messenger for this locality. For a few seconds the deep note reverberated, then he stopped ringing and waited for the almost silent approach of the motorcycle, the bright beam of the headlamp sweeping up the pathway to his door.

Again he rang, and yet again. But for all the effect his summons had he might just as well have been upon one of the uninhabited islands to the far east. He guessed what was wrong. All the messenger boys would be gathered in some quiet corner, out of the wind, discussing eagerly the signs and wonders that had blazed so terrifyingly in the dawn sky.

Grumbling a little he went to the outhouse in which he kept his car. As he backed out he saw that, in spite of the heavy overcast and the rain that was beginning to fall, it was almost light. As he drove down to the road the rain started to come down in earnest. Even in the gray light it seemed almost luminous, and as it fell there was a hissing and a crackling and a running of little blue sparks along the ground.

But Angam was in no mood to notice these things. He drove as fast as he dared, peering stolidly ahead through the almost solid sheets of water, his wheels casting a continuous fountain of spray on either side. At last he found that for which he was seeking—a column on which was mounted a curiously conventionalized little piece of statuary depicting a man holding in his hands a great flask. He turned sharp right, splattered up the drive to the house among its wet, weather-beaten trees.

At his pull of the lanyard at the door he heard a gong somewhere within boom sonorously. Impatiently he waited, shifting from one foot to the other whilst the torrential rain made rivulets down through the close, thick fur of his body.

It was a woman who answered.

"The doctor," he said, before she could speak. "It's my wife, Evanee Matangu. It's her first child. It shouldn't have come for another month. It was the shock of—"

"It was a shock for all of us."

She turned, called into the house—"Handrin! Another maternity case!"

"Coming! Has he got a car?"

"Yes. You won't need yours."

Little remained for the doctor to do when, finally, Angam succeeded in navigating the flooded streets to his home. Evanee was in bed and with her, a tiny morsel of yellow furred humanity, was her first son. All that remained for Handrin to do was to enter the date and time of the birth in his book, to act as witness when Angam formally named the child.

Linith brought wine, poured a flagon for herself, Evanee and each of the men. Mother and father dipped fingers into each other's flagons, then each, with wine moistened index finger, touched the forehead of the infant.

"I name you Abrel," said Angam.

"I name you Abrel," said Evanee.

Then all raised their flagons.

"To the new life," they said. "May it be as fair and as good as ours has been!"

"I would sleep," said Evanee.

"Then sleep," said the doctor. "And you need have no worry abot Abrel. Perhaps he was a little premature—but that I doubt. As far as I can judge he is quite normal. Feed him as you would any other child. Sleep well."

They adjourned to the living room. Here Linith had spread a simple meal of bread and wine. The doctor needed no urging to stay and break his fast—outside the wind was howling and driving the rain in streaming sheets against wall and window.

Normally, on these occasions, conversation would inevitably have been about the new life that had come into the world. But on this morning there was only one possible topic—Loana and the dramatically tragic fate that had overtaken her.

Angam mentioned the strange prickling he had felt on his skin just after the disaster.

"Yes," said Handrin, "I felt it too. And I have felt it before—"

"Where?"

"You know the country around Boondrom?"

"No. I have often meant to spend a vacation there—although, they tell me, there is little to see these days. Boondrom is almost extinct."

"The volcano is the least interesting thing. A few miles to the west there is a rocky plain. It is barren, and at night shines with a strange luminescence. Around its outskirts are stunted, misshapen plants and shrubs. They are pallid, unhealthy, and it is hard to determine their species. And there is always heat there—a dry, scorching heat. Although this may be volcanic.

"But if you venture over this plain you feel the same unpleasant prickling as we all felt when Loana went up in flames. If you stay there too long it is literally unendurable—and persists. I have treated too daring, or foolhardy, explorers of this region. Their fur has fallen out all over their bodies. Their skin has—rotted. They have become blind."

"And what could you do for them?"

"What *could* I do for them? The sleep of peace—that is all."

"So you think—?"

"I don't know what to think. But it seems to me that there must be power there—power of some kind. Perhaps power such as Lingrud, with his zinc plates and jars of acid has discovered—the power of the lightning. Or perhaps it has other applications. There is heat there—if that could be harnessed and used to drive a steam turbine, what need for elaborate oil furnaces? It would put Mang's heavier than air flying machine into the realm of practical politics."

"But Loana—"

"I'm coming to that. Suppose the Loanans—whoever or whatever they were—had this power. Suppose, in their final struggle for the last air and water, they used this power for weapons to destroy each other. And suppose, at the finish, it got out of hand—what then?"

"But such power is inconceivable, doctor!"

"So was the power that wiped Loana clean of life—that, for all we know, blew her to fragments."

"Blew her to fragments? But—the tides!"

Angam looked at the clock—then remembered that he had forgotten to wind its weights up the previous night. But, time or no time, his place was at his power storage plant when anything threatened his source of power. Linith and the doctor heard the door slam as he hastened out into the storm; faintly, above the wind and the rain, heard his splashing progress down the pathway to the road.

"I hope that Loana is still with us," said the doctor. "Otherwise Lingrud will have to get ahead fast with his experiments—or we shall have to move Darnala to Boondrom!"

At Boondrom was a small settlement, taking its name from the volcano. Guides lived there, and a few scientists, and those who maintained the hostels for tourists. There was railway communication with Darnala and with Tirona, although most visitors preferred to come by air. The last few miles of the rail journey were both hazardous and uncomfortable—the still frequent earth tremors did no good to the permanent way.

But Boondrom's days of glory were over. The crater was crusted thick with drab slag, only an occasional wisp of steam from an infrequent crack told of the fires slumbering quiescent in the depths.

The sleeping giant no longer attracted the casual sightseer. The arid, sterile plains to the westward had even less to recommend them to the holiday maker—yet the hostels of Boondrom were full. Lingrud was there, seeking some connection between the strange powers, sensed rather than measured, and the half-understood powers he was finding in his jars of acid with their zinc and carbon plates. Talang, the biologist, was there. It was he who conceived the idea of inducing a cow and a bull to mate in the middle of that unhealthy, uncanny expanse of bare rock. The result was even more grotesque than the examples of plant teratology surrounding the area. And Talang's fur turned snow white. His assistant was not so lucky. For him—the sleep of peace.

The scientists were watching on the summit of Boondrom when the last of Loana's city lights went out in a blaze of hell fire. Some there were who looked down to that plain to the westward, saw it flicker with answering, sympathetic light. Others forced themselves to keep their regard on the eastern heavens, saw, when the first thin veils of cirrus made vision possible, that the white-hot sphere was horribly scarred and pitted.

Then, with the first waves of heat striking the upper atmosphere, the clouds had swiftly arisen, the winds had striven to duplicate the turbulence of the end of Loana, and rain and lightning had hidden the sky, with its signs and portents, from human view.

Long and loud were the conferences held by the scientists in their hostel on the lower slopes of Boondrom. Long and loud were their arguments concerning the power that had devastated the sister world. That this power was man-made—or the work of beings with intelligence approximating that of humanity—they did not doubt. And the evidence they had seen of this same power unleashed opened vistas at once exhilarating and terrifying. The stars were now within reach—unless the world, man's footstool, were blasted into oblivion.

Power. Power. Power.

What was the power derived from the rise and fall of the tides, from the burning of mineral or vegetable oil, from little glass jars full of acid and zinc and carbon plates, besides this power that could lick the surface of a world clean of life?

They did not know the nature of this power. But they had seen it used—and they knew that what had been done by the ruling species of one world could be done again by that of another. And with less risk. It seemed obvious that the Loanans had destroyed themselves by desperate, savage warfare. With the people of Attrin this could never happen. The race was too kindly, too sane. The only danger would be unwise, rash experimentation. And surely safeguards could be devised. In any case it might well be centuries, generations, before the secret of the Loanans' power was stumbled upon. But it would be a goal to strive for.

It was on the fifth day after the trans-spacial disaster that the ship came down from Loana.

The sky was still overcast, although the wind had dropped a little and the rain had ceased. Observers around Mount Boondrom saw a bright light at their zenith—a light that, although it was high noon, was almost intolerable to the unshielded eye.

As it dropped lower it *was* intolerable. It so happened, however, that in the village of Boondrom was a fairly large supply of dark spectacles. Those who investigated the sterile plains to the westward were liable to suffer from optic disorders—and so it was logical that the local shopkeepers should keep in stock aids to impaired vision.

The light drifted down very slowly.

The watchers on the slopes of the slumbering volcano could, at last, see that it was under a spindle-shaped structure, metallic, with huge vanes at its lower end. It was no flying machine such as they had ever seen before. It was no flying machine such as had ever taken off from the land of Attrin—and to the north were only the icy, polar wastes, and to the south and west and east were wild lands peopled only by wild beasts.

This construction, this ship, could be only one thing.

A means of escape for some few survivors from Loana, a frail ark in which they had dared the deeps of space, in which they had defied and conquered the eternal darkness, escaped the fires of hell that had ravaged their own world.

How it could be done the watchers had no idea. Of one thing only were they certain—that it would require Power. And that Loana had possessed such power had been conclusively demonstrated.

Lower and lower drifted the strange construction, the alien ship. Brighter and brighter flared the incandescence at its base. Avidly, eagerly, the scientists scanned the details of its construction, hastily they held the object glasses of binoculars and telescopes over smoky oil flames, improvised filters that would enable them to see more than they could hope to see with the naked eye.

Here was the power of which they had dreamed, drifting down from the storm rent skies. Here was the power that would give into the hands of their race the keys to knowledge unguessed, undreamed. Here was the first contact with an alien folk from an alien world—a contact that could bring nothing good in its wake.

It seemed at first that the ship from Loana would fall upon the village of Boondrom—and then that it would fall in the cold crater of Boondrom itself. But the wind was blowing strong from the eastward, and it seemed that the strange vessel was making considerable westerly drift. It may have been that the pilot was avoiding a landing on what, even from the air, could be identified as the habitation of intelligent beings. And it is almost certain that he would try to avoid a landing on a mountain peak.

So it was that the alien ship with its tail of fire dipped behind the shoulder of Boondrom—and with its vanishing it seemed very dark. And with the abrupt cutting off of the thunder of its passage an ominous hush fell upon the world.

Some few observers, on the very summit of the mountain, saw the ship land. They saw the roaring, intolerable flames from its tail lick the surface of that dead, evil plain—and that is the last that they ever saw. The instantaneous, searing flare that followed was of too great an intensity for their minds to register, as was the crash of supernal thunder. But before the sound waves of the atomic explosion burst their eardrums all life had been scorched from them.

There were a few survivors in Boondrom itself. The village collapsed like a pack of cards—those people who were out of doors were incinerated—those between four walls were crushed by those same walls. But one or two, those who were under staircases or within doorways, escaped immediate death. Among these was a pilot of the regular air service to Darnala. He crawled out of the wreckage almost unhurt. For a while he searched for others who were still living, tore his hands and broke his nails burrowing among the wreckage. Those whom he did find— All that he could do was administer the sleep of peace.

Increasingly violent earth tremors were completing the destruction caused by the explosion. From the summit of Boondrom came a growing, expanding pillar of steam, of smoke, of fire. Then it burst into a shower of debris, a huge mushroom of black and white and brown vapor that ballooned up to mingle with that of the first cataclysm. It was then that the pilot realized that he was deaf. He could see—hazily—but for him the volcano's rebellion and defiance was enacted in dumb show.

Reeling like one drunken, whimpering a little, although he did not know it, he made his way to the airport. Most of the mooring masts were down—and the ships which had swung to them were fast drifting west, unmanned derelicts destined to fall at last in the sea to the brief wonder of the shark and whale.

One mast remained standing, and to it lay a little four-passenger ship. The pilot clambered up the ladder to the head of the mast, swung himself hand over hand to the gondola. He checked his water, his oil. He worked the lever that would ignite the furnace, looked anxiously at the gauge that would tell him when he had enough power to get under way.

Already volcanic debris was falling from the sky. Some of it fell with dull thuds on to the fabric of the balloon—although the noise he never heard. But he felt the vibration that trembled through the structure of the ship with every impact. He thought of cutting adrift—then realized that should he do so the wind would carry him right over the crater of the furiously erupting Boondrom. And beyond the volcano—should he survive the passage. The sky was alight with the flaring incandescence that made the volcanic fires a negation of light by contrast.

The needle of the gauge quivered, crept with agonizing slowness to the red line. The pilot pulled out the toggle from the eye of his mooring rope, opened his throttle and fed the steam from his water tube boiler into the turbines. The screws spun until they became shimmering, transparent circles. With helm hard over the little airship circled, steadied on a southeasterly course for Darnala.

When the man from Boondrom, nursing his battered little ship through the wind, the lightning and the torrential rain, reached Darnala he found the city in flames. He was too dazed, too mentally shattered by what he had already experienced to feel more than a mild surprise. And a dull resentment was there too, a feeling that it was essentially unfair that he should be the bearer of unappreciated, almost ignored evil tidings.

When a full twenty miles from the coast he had become aware that something was wrong. Down the wind came a haze of smoke, an acrid smell of burning. Sparks glinted and briefly glowed in the gale-driven murk like evil fireflies. And in the hills to the west of the town a new volcano spouted lava and boiling mud, so that he was obliged to make a wide detour to escape being wrecked in the violent updraught.

So it was that he approached the city from the south. He noted, almost without interest, the devastation in the harbor. The shipping was lying on its beam ends, sunk at its moorings with only masts and funnels showing above the heavy swell that was sweeping in over the breakwater. And surely the breakwater was gone— Certain it was that the watery hosts were marching in from the east to hurl themselves with unbroken fury upon the quays and wharves of the port. Only the great *Arrak* seemed undamaged, seaworthy. But she was berthed on the western side of the Dirnig Mole, partially protected from wind and sea by the low, strong warehouse running along its length. He could see the little figures of men busy about her decks, and from her tall smokestack a thin stream of black smoke poured down wind to mingle with the funeral pall of the doomed city.

Rollers creaked and the ship from Boondrom lost altitude as the tightening nets compressed the gas in the balloon. The airport was very close now, and its mooring masts loomed lofty through the acrid mist. But from each of them swayed and lurched a vast, billowing shape. Stray mooring lines, flying loose in the gale, coiled and snapped like whips. On the ground was a crowd of people—dumb, patient, resigned. At a signal from some official they began to move towards one of the masts. The man from Boondrom saw the leading trickle of refugees moving up inside the latticework structure with the slow deliberation of a column of ants on the march.

The little ship circled lower, and still lower.

At last one of the airport officials looked up from his work of supervising the evacuation, raised his megaphone and shouted something. Even if the man from Boondrom had not been deafened he would never have heard—the shrieking gale, the whine of giant turbines and the throb of innumerable propellers would have drowned any sound so puny as that of the human voice.

The official realized this, and gestured. The meaning of the sweeping motion of his arm was unmistakable. The incoming ship could not be berthed, would have to shift for herself as well as she might. The pilot raised his arm in a gesture of acceptance and farewell. He released the tension on his compressor nets. He rose swiftly, and the gale took hold of him, drove him down upon the unwieldy bulk of a ship already more than half loaded with refugees. Putting his helm hard over, opening the throttle of his starboard engine to its fullest extent, he strove desperately to avoid collision. He was almost successful, but, as he swept past and under the big ship's port after power unit, the tips of the idling propeller blades barely touched the taut upper surface of his gas bag.

He did not fall at once. Even when the gas was almost gone from the balloon the wind caught him and held him, drove him parachute-wise over the burning ruins of the city. And it was on one of the few houses—spared by some freak of blast—still standing that he finally crashed. His gondola failed to clear the parapet of the roof, the force of the impact pitched him out and clear. Had it not been for the plot of soft earth, the roof garden into which he was thrown, he would have died there and then. As it was, he lay there, dazed, while above him flapped and crackled the torn rags of silk that had once been his balloon, while the blazing oil from his engine poured down the side of the house and was driven by the screaming wind through the already broken windows.

"He will live, Angam."

The aviator could not hear the words, but he looked up through his haze of pain, saw the bearded lips move, dimly guessed what they were saying. The earth beneath him shook violently—and the stabbing pain from his broken legs and arm, bound and splinted as they were, made him cry out. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the shower of sparks as the last ruins of the gutted house collapsed.

"But to what purpose, Handrin?" demanded the other man. "Attrin is dying. Those of us still sound may drag out miserable lives for a few more years—or days. But for him—better the sleep of peace, I say."

"Angam is right," said Linith.

Magra, the doctor's wife, said nothing. And Evanee watched out of wide, fear-crazed eyes, clutching the infant Abrel to her breast ever more tightly.

"Perhaps you are right," said Handrin. He fumbled in his pouch, brought out the little phial in which was the sleep of peace. He withdrew the stopper. His hand went out, reaching for the aviator's mouth. But the pilot put out a feeble arm, warded off the merciful oblivion.

"No," he gasped, "not yet. I must tell my story. You must know what happened—"

And so, slowly, painfully, he told his tale of the disaster at Boondrom. Told of the alien ship riding down on its wings of fire and thunder, of the fire and thunder that had attended its coming to that evil plain to the west of the volcano. And as he talked, gaspingly, brokenly, the earth tremors grew even more frequent, the earth tremors and the sensation that the whole world was tilting beneath them like the deck of a foundering ship.

When he had finished he took the deadly draught gladly. His duty was done. He had told his story, given his unnecessary warning. And it is doubtful if he would have survived long had he not been given the sleep of peace. But it made his passing easier.

"So," said Handrin, "I think I see. Suppose that there was another deposit of those same minerals that make the Boondrom plain under the hills to the west of Darnala— And suppose that by some subterranean vein, the two were connected— Don't you see? There is power there—the power that the Loanans used to drive their ship. And when their ship touched down the fire from the exhausts, the fire from some strange machine burning that mineral as fuel, touched off the tons of fuel lying idle at Boondrom. And the spark flashed along the underground vein, like the little spark along the fuse of a blasting charge. And the charge was under the hills just inland from the city—"

"But what is happening now?"

"You should know better than I, Angam. You are an engineer."

"Yes. Perhaps I should. I know that all Attrin is balanced on the edge of the western deep like houses on a cliff edge. And I know that there is a line of weakness in the earth's crust running through Boondrom— And what I know frightens me. Handrin! Attrin is sinking like a great ship!"

"Look!" cried Linith.

Overhead, rising and falling in their passage, their line ragged yet, considering the adverse weather conditions, surprisingly well kept, came a fleet of great ships. The big passenger liners were there, and the little freighters, each towing astern its string of motorless cargo balloons. But the cargo carried on this last occasion was human lives. Around the fringes of the squadron soared and hovered the tiny pleasure craft, some so heavily laden as to have the utmost difficulty in maintaining altitude.

The leading ship swung as she passed over the center of the city, bore down for the airport. One by one, sagging to leeward, clawing up into the wind in an attempt to maintain their line, the rest followed. The throbbing of their propellers was loud and insistent above the howling of the gale.

"From Tirona," said Handrin.

"Tirona is gone," replied Angam.

"And they will find no refuge here."

They were still sitting in the garden, finding a little shelter in the lee of the ruins of the house, when the messenger from the City Fathers found them. His hair was plastered flat against his body and he was bleeding from a deep cut over his right eye. He accepted gratefully the flagon of wine passed to him by Linith—she had salvaged some scraps of food and drink from the wreckage of her home. He drank deeply. Then—

"You are Angam Matangu?"

"Yes."

"The City Fathers send you this, Angam Matangu."

Angam drew the roll of fabric from its cylinder. He read it slowly, his lips unconsciously shaping the words as his eye ran down the lines of script.

"I am ordered aboard *Arrak,*" he said at last. "I and my family." To the messenger— "Is there any word concerning my friend Dr. Handrin?"

"I fear not, Angam Matangu. The City Fathers have drawn up a list—they desire to save as many representative technicians as possible so that a new civilization may be set up in the new lands to the east. The quota of physicians and surgeons is already filled."

"It is as well," said Handrin. "With Attrin gone—what remains? Magra and I will sit here among the ruins with our wine and our memories of happiness. And will you share them?" he asked the messenger.

"It would be an honor—but I would not intrude."

"Then one last flagon of wine before we part."

And when Angam and his family trudged down the long driveway to the road to the port they did not know whether to pity or envy Handrin and Magra.

Angam was glad that he had not attempted to make the journey by car. The roads were blocked by piles of wreckage, by fallen trees. And great crevasses had opened here and there, deep chasms from which came a sullen rumbling, the acrid fumes of the pit beneath. In one place a great, roaring geyser was throwing its column of steam and spray high into the air. Down wind its condensation fell as a scalding rain.

Through the still smoldering ruins slunk lean, tawny shapes—the beasts from the wild country driven to the coast by unknown, half-guessed cataclysms inland. They saw the half-eaten body of a woman with a lioness crouched over it. The great cat lifted its head and snarled as they passed. And when they had left the grisly sight behind they heard a great yelping and snarling—and turned to see a pack of wolves disputing for the bodies of both hunter and victim.

Evanee was stumbling and whimpering so, without a word, Angam lifted Abrel from her grasp. The child set up a thin, dismal howling. "Let me," said Linith. In her arms the infant was quiet.

Long before they got to the port the water was over their ankles. As they came down the broad road to the quays it was knee deep. Some of the smaller craft had been righted, had been brought far inland. It was fantastic and terrifying to see ships among what was left of the houses.

But Angam had no eyes for any of these things. He was trying to follow the once familiar road to the Dirnig Mole—a road now feet deep beneath the swirling waters. Ahead, her tall funnel a beacon through the spray and driving rain, lay *Arrak*. Her derricks had been lowered; as far as the inexperienced Angam could see at this distance she was ready for sea. A plume of white steam grew suddenly from her funnel, but the deep booming note of her whistle was lost in the clamor of wind and water.

Angam realized that he wanted to be saved. The drive, the savage will to live, was singularly absent from the make-up of his race—but now, to him, *Arrak* was Attrin. She was all that remained of the fair civilization that had stood on the threshold of maturity. She *was* that civilization—and would carry its seeds to whatever strange land chance and storm might bring her.

Putting his head down he waded on stolidly. Behind him came Evanee, and behind her Linith, the child still in her arms. He no longer troubled to feel his way with caution—Captain Noab could not afford to hang on much longer. He had already stayed at his berth far longer than was prudent. And far more was at stake than his ship, the lives of his passengers and crew.

Neck high the water swirled around Angam as he reached for the ropes at the foot of the gangway. Holding on with his left hand he helped Evanee on to the platform. Linith handed Abrel up to Evanee, then hoisted herself up after the child. She and the sailor on duty seized Angam—pulled him up to the grating where he lay gasping like a landed fish.

An officer came down, consulted a list.

"Twenty more to come," he said, "but we can't delay much longer."

Together with his women Angam clambered to the upper deck. The wide expanse was crammed with refugees. Scorning the warmth and the dryness below they were here to see the last of their home, their world. The wind buffeted them and the rain stung and bruised them with its countless driving arrows—yet they could not bring themselves to seek shelter below decks.

To the west, beyond the gutted city, the low line of hills spouted flame and smoke. It seemed that those hills were lower than of old, that they were sinking, slowly but surely as the land of Attrin foundered and tilted, heeled to the west as it sank into the unplumbed depths of the western ocean. The hills *were* lower—soon the flaring volcanoes were only a low line of fire along the horizon—red and menacing below the black pall of smoke.

Some of the smaller ships, their decks packed tight, cast loose from their improvised moorings and nosed out to the sea. They passed over the place where the breakwater had been, turned their blunt noses to meet the steep, vicious waves. Doggedly they plunged into the weather, spray and green water sweeping over their superstructures until only their flaring funnels were visible. The refugees aboard *Arrak* watched them go—and watched with horror the great wall of water that came roaring in from the east.

Steep it was, and towering high beyond any seaman's experience. The line of foam along its crest was like the snow along the peaks of some mountain range. The little ships reared to meet it with the gallantry of the very small—reared and slid their sterns under.

From the bridge came a deep and urgent bellowing as Noab shouted orders to his officers on stations. The wind took his words, shredded them and tossed them wide in useless, unintelligible fragments. But the crew at bow and stern had anticipated such an emergency, knew as well as their captain what they must do. Axes gleamed dully in the lurid light, fell upon the bartaut mooring lines. *Arrak* shuddered and stirred, heaved and lifted to the smaller seas that were running before the monster sea like foothills before a mountain range.

Now only one hawser remained, a rope running aft from the forecastle head, its eye over a deep submerged bollard on the invisible quay. Noab came ahead on his engines. Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, the stern came away from the wharf. Now the onrushing wall of water was broad on the starboard bow—now it was coming ahead. More orders from the bridge—and again the axes gleamed. The last rope parted with an explosive crack, the ends sprang back and cut him who had wielded the ax almost in two. But *Arrak* was free. Using his stern power Noab swung her to meet the seismic wave.

As had done her sisters—*Arrak* reared to meet the monster. Her bows lifted, steeper and ever steeper. On deck was a scene of terrible confusion as that tightly packed mass of people fought to keep their footing, slithered helplessly aft on the wet, slippery planking. Stout rails—designed to stand under almost any weight but this, snapped under the strain, bodies fell into the sea or tumbled from the upper deck to crash, maimed and broken, on to the after hatches. From below came the fear-crazed bellowing of the cattle.

But *Arrak* fought like a thing alive, her screws bit deep and strong, held the enormous weight of the ship against that fatal, sternward plunge. On her bridge Noab himself had the wheel, conscious that should he allow *Arrak* to sag to port or starboard she would be doomed. As she would be doomed if one of the two thin pipes running from wheelhouse to steering engine, the hydraulic system by which the motion of his wheel was imparted to his rudder, should break or burst.

Over the bow loomed a watery cliff. It broke and tumbled, surged aft along the foredeck in a boiling cascade. It hit the bridge structure like something solid—and Noab found himself sprawled, with his officers and quartermasters, against the after bulkhead of the wheelhouse. The broken wheel was still in his hands. Before he could regain his feet *Arrak's* bow dipped, sickeningly, dreadfully. Thirty thousand tons deadweight—she slid down the seaward slope of the ocean mountain with uncontrolled, uncontrollable acceleration. When she reached the trough it was as though she had been driven ashore at full speed. Pipes burst, rivets rattled around her decks and compartments like machine gun fire. To the general tumult was added the hissing roar of escaping steam.

Only a few of those aft saw the end of Attrin. The hills to the west of Darnala subsided, and over them poured the full weight of the western ocean. Seismic wave from the east met seismic wave from the west—and the pillar of water and steam and wreckage surged bellowing to the low clouds, locking down such few airships as still hovered over the scene of the tragedy, as had not been blown west to perish in the hell of steam and whirlwind and atomic fire over Boondrom.

And like a crippled beast *Arrak* moved over the face of the waters—aimless, riding out the storm, a ship without a haven.

In his plain, solidly furnished stateroom Noab sat at the head of his table. Around him were his officers—reflecting their master's mood of grave concern. At the lower end of the table were the representatives of the refugees.

"But where are we, Noab?" It was Angam who spoke, an Angam much older than the man who had boarded *Arrak* on the Day of the Ending. His pelt was liberally sprinkled with silver—and yet a bare thirty days had passed since he had come aboard the ship.

"I wish that I knew, Angam Matangu. Since the sky cleared we have obtained accurate latitudes. As you know—longitude cannot, unless we can devise a clock that is a perfect timekeeper, be determined. And it has been impossible to estimate what easting we have made since The End. It is possible that the indraught into the gulf where Attrin once was has more than canceled the distance steamed from Attrin.

"But I intend to steer east. We cannot steer west for obvious reasons—it would mean passing over the grave of our homeland and, for all we know, the volcanoes are still active. On this course we must find land sooner or later.

"Now— Food and water. Regarding these the situation is good. So great has been our death roll that we have now a bare half of the two thousand originally provisioned for.

"Fuel— That is the problem. We have enough for about ten days steaming at reduced speed. I need hardly tell you gentlemen—most of you are engineers—that the consumption varies, roughly, as the cube of the speed. To put it crudely I intend to go a long way in a long time.

"Starting from tomorrow we shall send the small aircraft we carry on reconnaissance flights.

"And more than that we cannot do."

"You have done more than any other man could have done, Noab." There was a general murmur of approbation from the foot of the table. "You have snatched some faint memory of the happiness that was Attrin from the burning, and you will see the seeds of the new Attrin planted in the islands of the east!"

Noab rose to his feet. He seemed to be deeply moved. He signaled to a girl who was standing by a locker against the after bulkhead. From it she took jars and flagons, handed wine to the captain and to each of his guests.

"To the new Attrin," toasted Angam. "To the new dawn of civilization besides which this that has just perished will be the false dawn!"

"To the true dawn!"

Solitary, a ship by herself, *Arrak* moved over the face of the waters. Her once clean hull was streaked with rust, the crimson funnel with its golden lion was salt-caked and dingy. To the west the afterglow painted the sky with pale fire. Eastward, among the first, faint stars, was a little light that bobbed and dipped, that wove among the fixed constellations, that steadily waxed in brightness.

The whine of an aircraft turbine was heard, the throbbing of aerial propellers. The little airship circled the surface vessel. It came in from astern, hovered above the after deck, matched course and speed with its mother ship. From it snaked down a plummet weighted line. The sailors caught it, took it to a winch. Swaying on the end of its tether like a child's toy balloon the little airship was drawn down to the deck. Willing hands seized the lines pendant from its gondola, threw hasty turns around cleats and bollards. When his craft was securely moored the pilot clambered down to the gently rising and falling planking. His keen eyes distinguished in the dusk the one he was looking for. "Captain Noab! Sir! Land!"

The cry went round the ship like wildfire. Long before Noab and his aviator in the chartroom had determined such matters as course and speed every man, woman and child in the vessel knew that their voyaging was almost ended. Even the livestock below decks seemed to sense it—there arose a clamorous bellowing from their stalls that had nothing in it of fear or apprehension.

On his bridge Noab walked to the binnacle, peered into its dimly lighted bowl. "Steer South Ninety-Five East," he ordered the quartermaster. One of the officers was speaking into a voice pipe. "Revolutions for five knots, please," he said.

In his cramped quarters Angam sat with Evanee and Linith.

"Land," he said. In his voice was wonder that there should be any solidity left in the world.

"And about time," grumbled Evanee. "I don't believe that that old man Noab ever knew where we were!"

"But what sort of land?" Linith, as always, was practical.

"The airman said that there were hills, and forests, and streams. But to the west it was bare and glistening, like the ooze of the ocean bed. It seemed that it was still rising from the sea."

"Something must rise, I suppose, to balance Attrin."

"What does it matter? We have found a new home."

"And when do we get there?"

"The captain has reduced speed"—at this there was a cry of indignation from Evanee—"he does not want to arrive before dawn."

It was not only Evanee who was incensed by Noab's caution. Throughout the ship ran the impatient murmuring, the indignant whispers. The rails were lined by people peering ahead into the darkness. Overhead rode Loana, not far from the full, her once smooth face scarred and pitted. On any other night the spectacle of the seared sister world, still dreadfully novel, would have held the eye of every observer. But not on this night. Every low dark cloud along the eastern horizon was hailed as the long desired and anticipated landfall—and every low dark cloud that lifted from the rim of the world made all beholders prey to the uneasy suspicion that the pilot of the little airship had been the victim of an hallucination.

But, recking little of the hopes and fears of her living freight, the ship ploughed steadily on. From aft, at regular intervals, came the whine of the little steam winch as the questing plummet, having failed in its search for bottom, was hauled once more to the taffrail. From the bridge, deep, sonorous, came the sound of the gong as the last watches of the voyage tolled each its own requiem.

At about an hour before dawn *Arrak* struck. It was not a violent jar—as strandings go it was very gentle. The ship slid forward slowly, then stopped. The great screws threshed in reverse—but *Arrak* did not move. From the stern a depth of ninety fathoms was obtained—but along the sides, from forward to as far aft as the mainmast, there was a bare thirty-five feet. And this was *Arrak's* draught.

On the bridge the tired old man who wore on his wrists the gold bracelets of authority heard the latest reports, then said—"There is nothing more for me to do. I have found land for them. The ship is safe. Today, or tomorrow, or the day after, the land will have risen still further—and they will be able to walk ashore. And I have thrown away my ship."

One of his officers suggested laying out an anchor astern, the jettison of stores and ballast, but the captain refused to listen.

"No," he said. "The purpose of this, our last voyage, has been fulfilled. This is our last port. And nowhere, in all the world, is there another haven for us."

With the first flush of dawn the water fell still further, and as the wan light increased so did the depth of water around the ship decrease. From aft came ominous creakings as the stern hanging clear of the ledge with no support, began to sag and buckle. But only the seamen were concerned with this. The refugees crowded the decks, staring ahead to the promised land. They saw the green hills and the trees, the river that poured itself over the golden sand of the beach and then spread itself over the gray slime of what had been the ocean bed.

Some were already over the side, clambering down the hastily improvised ladders, floundering waist deep in the stinking ooze. Overhead the little airship circled, its balloon glowing golden in the first rays of Ramanu. And the ship that had served them so faithfully was no more than a prison from which they proposed to escape with the utmost possible speed.

Angam Matangu sat outside his hut on the westward slopes of Mount Arrak. The ship after which the hill was named, the mountain that had been upthrust from the ocean depths silently and smoothly, was now little more than a mound of rusted girders and ruined, useless machinery—standing silent among the rank grasses, a mute witness to the high estate from which Man had fallen.

Yet Angam was content. Blue in the evening air rose the thin smoke of the cooking fires where the women of the tribe prepared the evening meal. Around him were his fields—the ground from which he had wrested, by the sweat of his brow throughout the long, hard years, sustenance for his family and himself. Linith was gone—but it was pleasant to sit here and remember her. He wrinkled his hairy brows—gray now—in an effort to recall how many winters ago that had been.

She had been too civilized for this life, had Linith. But Evanee—it was surprising how she had hardened. Yes—a wry smile flickered over his broad mouth—and coarsened. But she had the qualities that made for survival until the race should recover from the shock of its near extinction, should begin once more the long climb upwards to mechanized civilization.

Abrel appeared on the slope of the hill, climbed upwards to his father with long, easy strides. He sat down beside the older man, pulled a generous bunch off the spray of berries that he was carrying and gave them to him.

"Thank you, Abrel. These are good."

"Yes. I was thinking that we might take cuttings and try to cultivate the bushes in our own garden."

"By all means, son."

For a while the two sat in silence. Then—

"What is the trouble between you and Carran?"

"Trouble? Why, there is no trouble, Father."

"Evanee told me that you had been interfering with him, would not let him live his life his own way."

"Suppose that way is altogether alien from what we consider right?"

"Oh. So there has been trouble between you and your brother. Just what was it?"

"It would have come to the ears of the Village Fathers sooner or later. It is all these people who were born after the Day of the Ending. You must know that they are different."

"Physically, yes. They are smooth and hairless. Their bodies are frail. And they move around so quickly that they will be worn out before they reach maturity."

"But it's more than physical, father. It's here!" The young man tapped his head. "Do you know what I found them doing? Carran and Dorilee and Turbal? They had taken a cow from the herd of Drinrud, and they had slit its throat with a sharp instrument they had made from the metal of the *Arrak*. And they were cutting off great pieces of the bleeding flesh—and they were *eating* it!"

"Abrel!"

"But it's true, Father. And when I stopped them they were ashamed—but I saw a look in their eyes that wasn't human. Have you ever looked into the eyes of a trapped rat? And seen the dreadful, sickening hate there? It was like that."

"Hate," muttered the old man. "We do not hate. We cannot. Yet—" His mind winged back to the evil plain west of Boondrom, to the plant monsters encircling it, to the power of the plain and the power that had blasted Loana and that had sunk Attrin. He thought of the new hairless folk that had been born since the Day of the Ending—of them and of the other children scarce more intelligent than the beasts. He thought of the arrogance of these new hairless folk, of their drive and ambition, of the unhuman intensity of their emotions. Yet, one of them was his son—and was beloved by Evanee.

"I must think this over," he muttered. "Tomorrow I will call a meeting of the Village Fathers."

But the next day was too late.

Late that night he was awakened by Evanee. She bent over his bed, the bed in which he was sunk deep in a nostalgic dream of Attrin. She shook him, gently at first, then roughly. "Linith," he said, half awake. "Linith."

"It's me, you old fool. It is long past the tenth hour, and neither Abrel nor Carran are in."

"What of it? They are old enough to look after themselves."

"Yes. But you don't know all of it. Abrel has been interfering with Carran and his friends. I am afraid that he may have done them some hurt."

And Angam was afraid, but not for Carran. He arose hastily, cast around him a robe against the night chill. Swiftly for one of his bulk he padded to the doorway of the hut, bent his head under the low lintel and passed outside.

The sky was clear and Loana was at the full. The ghastly silver face shone with a hard radiance, casting black shadows from huts and trees and rocks. It was very quiet.

The old man paused, listening intently. It seemed to him that from a black copse on the upper slopes of the hill came the noise of chanting. There was some quality about it, evil, alien, that made every hair of his body stand erect. He hesitated—then reached inside his doorway for the metal-tipped sapling that served both as spear and staff. The feel of the rough haft of his weapon in his hand was comforting.

Swiftly, silently, he climbed the hill. More slowly, but still silently, he crept through the undergrowth of the coppice. A lane of trees had been cut down in a north-south direction, and at the northern end was a stone slab. There was something tied on the slab, something dark. It lay in the shadows cast by the hairless folk around the altar.

One of them was Carran.

Held high in his right hand was something that glinted. He faced away from the slab, faced south so that the rays of Loana shone full in his face.

"Mother Loana, behold us, thy children," he cried.

"Mother Loana, behold us, thy children,
"Spawned of the thunder, the flame and the flood—
"Lift us to sit with thee,
"Smite thou our enemy—
"Let the sins of our fathers be washed out in blood!"

The group before the altar parted. Behind it was revealed the girl Dorilee. In the masses of her black hair was bound a crescent of shining silver. And in the light of Loana her body shone as silvery bright as Loana herself.

In her right hand was a long knife.

And the thing on the altar trussed and gagged was Abrel.

Angam moved fast—but not fast enough. The knife had buried itself in Abrel's heart before he had broken through the undergrowth. At first those around the sacrifice did not notice him—then Carran turned. His right hand, that held a knife like that used by Dorilee, swept forward. Angam parried with his spear, caught his son a resounding blow on the right temple. The young man staggered and fell to the ground.

Immediately the hairless folk were all around the old man. They were weak—but they were many. They pinioned his arms to his sides, one of them grasped the hair of his head and pulled it back to stretch his neck for the eager knife.

But Carran, raising himself on one elbow, called to his followers to stop.

"It is my father," he said. "Do not harm him."

"But Abrel was your brother."

"No matter. Him I hated."

He took the old man's spear, leaned upon it like a staff. In spite of his youth an almost visible mantle of authority seemed to descend upon him.

"I am sorry, father," he said, "but it is best that we—I and my people—go. We are too alike—and too unlike—to live in peace. Besides—we know that you and your fellows, by your neglect of Loana, who craves worship, brought upon yourselves the fire and the flood. We can live no longer with unbelievers."

"Then go," said Angam.

There was nothing more to be said. Carran and his people trooped silently from the clearing. Angam watched them go, their pale forms flitting down the hillside. He wondered dimly what they would make of it all—whether they would, in the fullness of time, attain the heights of lost Attrin. He could not say—balanced against their undoubted drive was their emotional instability, their queer, unbalanced beliefs, the savagery that might as easily cast them into the depths as force them, fighting tooth and nail, to the peaks.

Angam sat by the altar and the dead body of his son Abrel—an old man and tired. The night was chill and he drew his robe ever closer about him. The stars shone scintillant in the clear sky. Loana slowly slipped from the meridian and dipped, lower and lower, to the western horizon. In the east fresh constellations rose and wheeled in slow processional towards the zenith. A wan light, ghostly, seemingly darker than the starry darkness, waxed slowly. And as the old man rose stiffly to his feet it was already fading.

"The false dawn," he muttered into his beard. "The false dawn—"

Were Carran and his kind, then, the true dawn?

Or would they play out, here on Earth, the tragic drama that had made the Moon a scarred and pitted horror—unleash powers that would send the world reeling forever through time and space, a seared and sterile mausoleum of the hopes and fears of the ages?

After Attrin Man reverted to savagery, his scientific knowledge forgotten. The first ice age came and went, completing the destruction of the historical past. In the difficult periods which followed neither the past nor the future seemed to matter. Slowly, however, Man's aspirations flickered to life and grew into a civilization so mighty that it blanketed the world. Technician though he was, he had yet to conquer himself.

ATLANTIS

by Edward E. Smith, Ph.D.

ARIPONIDES, RECENTLY elected Faros of Atlantis for his third five-year term, stood at a widow of his office atop the towering Farostery. His hands were clasped loosely behind his back. He did not really see the tremendous expanse of quiet ocean, nor the bustling harbor, nor the metropolis spread out so magnificently and so busily beneath him. He stood there, motionless, until a subtle vibration warned him that visitors were approaching his door.

"Come in, gentlemen . . . Please be seated." He sat down at one end of a table molded of transparent plastic. "Psychologist Talmonides, Statesman Cleto, Minister Philamon, Minister Marxes and Officer Artomenes, I have asked you to come here personally because I have every reason to believe that the shielding of this room is proof against eavesdroppers; a thing which no longer can be said of our supposedly private television channels. We must discuss, and if possible come to some decision concerning, the state in which our nation now finds itself.

"Each of us knows within himself exactly what he is. Of our own powers, we cannot surely know each others' inward selves. The tools and techniques of psychology, however, are potent and exact; and Talmonides, after exhaustive and rigorous examination of each one of us, has certified that no taint of disloyalty exists among us."

"Which certification is not worth a damn," the burly Officer declared. "What assurance do we have that Talmonides himself is not one of the ringleaders? Mind you, I have no reason to believe that he is not completely loyal. In fact, since he has been one of my best friends for over twenty years, I believe implicitly that he is. Nevertheless the plain fact is, Ariponides, that all the precautions you have taken, and any you can take, are and will be useless insofar as definite knowledge is concerned. The real truth is and will remain unknown."

"You are right," the Psychologist conceded. "And, such being the case, perhaps I should withdraw from the meeting."

"That wouldn't help, either." Artomenes shook his head. "Any competent plotter would be prepared for this, as for any other contingency. One of us others would be the real operator."

"And the fact that our Officer is the one who is splitting hairs so finely could be taken to indicate which one of us the real operator could be," Marxes pointed out, cuttingly.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" Ariponides protested. "While absolute certainty is of course impossible to any finite mind, you all know how Talmonides was tested; you know that in his case there is no reasonable doubt. Such chance as exists, however, must be taken, for if we do not trust each other fully in this undertaking, failure is inevitable. With this word of warning I will get on with my report.

"This world-wide frenzy of unrest followed closely upon the controlled liberation of atomic energy and may be—probably is—traceable to it. It is in no part due to imperialistic aims or acts on the part of Atlantis. This fact cannot be stressed too strongly. We never have been and are not now interested in Empire. It is true that the other nations began as Atlantean colonies, but no attempt was ever made to hold any one of them in colonial status against the wish of its electorate. All nations were and are sister states. We gain or lose together. Atlantis, the parent, was and is a clearing-house, a co-ordinator of effort, but has never claimed or sought authority to rule; all decisions being based upon free debate and free and secret ballot.

"But now! Parties and factions everywhere, even in old Atlantis. Every nation is torn by internal dissensions and strife. Nor is this all. Uighar as a nation is insensately jealous of the Island of the South, who in turn is jealous of Maya. Maya of Bantu, Bantu of Ekopt, Ekopt of Norheim, and Norheim of Uighar. A vicious circle, worsened by other jealousies and hatreds intercrossing everywhere. Each fears that some other is about to try to seize control of the entire world; and there seems to be spreading rapidly the utterly baseless belief that

Atlantis itself is about to reduce all other nations of Earth to vassalage.

"This is a bald statement of the present condition of the world as I see it. Since I can see no other course possible within the constituted framework of our democratic government, I recommend that we continue our present activities, such as the international treaties and agreements upon which we are now at work, intensifying our effort wherever possible. We will now hear from Statesman Cleto."

"You have outlined the situation clearly enough, Faros. My thought, however, is that the principal cause of the trouble is the coming into being of this multiplicity of political parties, particularly those composed principally of crackpots and extremists. The connection with atomic energy is clear: since the atomic bomb gives a small group of people the power to destroy the world, they reason that it thereby confers upon the authority to dictate to the world. My recommendation is merely a special case of yours; that every effort be made to influence the electorates of Norheim and of Uighar into supporting an effective international control of atomic energy."

"You have your data tabulated in symbolics?" asked Talmonides, from his seat at the keyboard of a calculating machine.

"Yes. Here they are."

"Thanks."

"Minister Philamon," the Faros announced.

"As I see it—as any intelligent man should be able to see it—the principal contribution of atomic energy to this world-wide chaos was the complete demoralization of labor," the gray-haired Minister of Trade stated, flatly. "Output per man-hour should have gone up at least twenty per cent, in which case prices would automatically have come down. Instead, short-sighted guilds imposed drastic curbs on production, and now seem to be surprised that as production falls and hourly wages rise, prices also rise and real income drops. Only one course is possible, gentlemen; labor must be made to listen to reason. This feather-bedding, this protected loafing, this . . ."

"I protest!" Marxes, Minister of Work, leaped to his feet. "The blame lies squarely with the capitalists. Their greed, their rapacity, their exploitation of . . ."

"One moment, please!" Ariponides rapped the table sharply. "It is highly significant of the deplorable condition of the times that two Ministers of State should speak as you two have just spoken. I take it that neither of you has anything new to contribute to this symposium?"

Both claimed the floor, but both were refused it by vote.

"Hand your tabulated data to Talmonides," the Faros directed. "Officer Artomenes?"

"You, our Faros, have more than intimated that our defense program, for which I am primarily responsible, has been largely to blame for what has happened," the grizzled warrior began. "In part, perhaps it was—one must be blind indeed not to see the connection, and biased indeed not to admit it. But what should I have done, knowing that there is no practical defense against atomic bombs? Every nation has them, and is manufacturing more and more. Every nation is infested with the agents of every other. Should I have tried to keep Atlantis toothless in a world bristling with fangs? And could I—or anyone else—have succeeded in doing so?"

"Probably not. No criticism was intended; we must deal with the situation as it actually exists. Your recommendations, please?"

"I have thought this thing over day and night, and can see no solution which can be made acceptable to our—or to any real—democracy. Nevertheless, I have one recommendation to make. We all know that Norheim and Uighar are the sore spots, particularly Norheim. We have more bombs as of now than both of them together. We know that Uighar's supersonic jobs are ready. We don't know exactly what Norheim has, since they cut my Intelligence line a while back, but I'm sending over another operative—my best man, too—tonight. If he finds out that we have enough advantage in speed, and I'm pretty sure that we have, I say hit both Norheim and Uighar right then, while we can, before they hit us. And hit them hard—pulverize them. Then set up a world government strong enough to knock out any nation—including Atlantis—that will not cooperate with it. This course of action is flagrantly against all international law and all the principles of democracy, I know; and even it might not work. It is, however, as far as I can see, the only course which *can* work."

"You—we all—perceive its weaknesses." The Faros thought for minutes. "You cannot be sure that your Intelligence has located all of the danger points, and many of them must be so far underground as to be safe from even our heaviest missiles. We all, including you, believe that the Psychologist is right in holding that the reaction of the other nations to such action would be both unfavorable and violent. Your report, please. Talmonides."

"I have already put my data into the integrator." The Psychologist punched a button and the mechanism began to whir and to click. "I have only one new fact of any importance; the name of one of the higher-ups and its corollary implication that there may be some degree of cooperation between Norheim and Uighar . . ."

He broke off as the machine stopped clicking and ejected its report.

"Look at that graph—up ten points in seven days!" Talmonides pointed a finger. "The situation is deteriorating faster and faster. The conclusion is unavoidable—you can see yourselves that this summation line is fast approaching unity—that the outbreaks will become uncontrollable in approximately eight days. With one slight exception—here—you will notice that the lines of organization and purpose are as random as ever. In spite of this conclusive integration I would be tempted to believe that this seeming lack of coherence was due to insufficient data—that back of this whole movement there is a carefully set-up and completely integrated plan—except for the fact that the factions and the nations are so evenly matched. But the data are sufficient. It is shown conclusively that no one of the other nations can possibly win, even by totally destroying Atlantis. They would merely destroy each other and our entire civilization. According to this forecast, in arriving at which the data furnished by our Officer were prime determinants, that will surely be the outcome unless remedial measures be taken at once. You are of course sure of your facts, Artomenes?"

"I am sure. But you said you had a name, and that it indicated a Norheim-Uighar hookup. What is that name?"

"An old friend of yours . . ."

"Lo Sung!" The words as spoken were a curse of fury.

"None other. And, unfortunately, there is as yet no course of action indicated which is at all promising of success."

"Use mine, then!" Artomenes jumped up and banged the table with his fist. "Let me send two flights of rockets over right now that will blow Uigharstoy and Norgrad into radioactive dust and make a thousand square miles around the only way they can learn anything; let them learn!"

"Sit down, Officer," Ariponides directed, quietly. "That course, as you have already pointed out, is indefensible. It violates every Prime Basic of our civilization. Moreover, it would be entirely futile, since this resultant makes it clear that every nation on Earth would be destroyed within the day."

"What, then?" Artomenes demanded, bitterly. "Sit still here and let them annihilate us?"

"Not necessarily. It is to formulate plans that we are here. Talmonides will by now have decided, upon the basis of our pooled knowledge, what must be done."

"The outlook is not good, not good at all," the Psychologist announced, gloomily. "The only course of action which carries any promise whatever of success—and its probability is only point one eight—is the one recommended by the Faros, modified slightly to include Artomenes' suggestion of sending his best operative on the indicated mission. For highest morale, by the way, the Faros should also interview this agent before he sets out. Ordinarily I would not advocate a course of action having so little likelihood of success; but since it is simply a continuation and intensification of what we are already doing, I do not see how we can adopt any other."

"Are we agreed?" Ariponides asked, after a short silence.

They were agreed. Four of the conferees filed out and a brisk young man strode in. Although he did not look at the Faros his eyes asked questions.

"Reporting for orders, sir." He saluted the Officer punctiliously.

"At ease, sir." Artomenes returned the salute. "You were called here for a word from the Faros. Sir, I present Captain Phryges."

"Not orders, son . . . no." Ariponides' right hand rested in greeting upon the captain's left shoulder, wise old eyes probed deeply into gold flecked, tawny eyes of youth; the Faros saw, without really noticing, a flaming thatch of red-bronze-auburn hair. "I asked you here to wish you well; not only for myself, but for all our nation and perhaps for our entire race. While everything in my being rebels against an unprovoked and unannounced assault, we may be compelled to choose between our Officer's plan of campaign and the destruction of civilization. Since you already know the vital importance of your mission, I need not enlarge upon it. But I want you to know fully, Captain Phryges, that all Atlantis flies with you this night."

"Th . . . thank you, sir." Phryges gulped twice to steady his voice. "I'll do my best, sir."

And later, in a wingless craft flying toward the airfield, young Phryges broke a long silence. "So *that* is the Faros . . . I like him, Officer . . . I have never seen him close up before . . . there's something about him . . . He isn't like my father, much, but it seems as though I have known him for a thousand years!"

"Hm . . . m . . . m. Peculiar. You two are a lot alike, at that, even though you don't look anything like each other. . . . Can't put a finger on exactly what it is, but it's there." Although Artomenes, or any other of his time, could not place it, the resemblance was indeed there. It was in and back of the eyes; it was the "look of eagles." "But here we are, and your ship's ready. Luck, son."

"Thanks, sir. But one more thing. If it should—if I don't get back—will you see that my wife and the baby are . . . ?"

"I will, son. They will leave for North Maya tomorrow morning. They will live, whether you and I do or not. Anything else?"

"No, sir. Thanks. Goodbye."

The ship was a tremendous flying wing. A standard commercial job. Empty—passengers, even crewmen, were never subjected to the brutal accelerations regularly used by unmanned carriers. Phryges scanned the panel. Tiny motors were pulling tapes through the controllers. Every light showed green. Everything was set. Donning a water-proof coverall, he slid through a flexible valve into his acceleration-tank and waited.

A siren yelled briefly. Black night turned blinding white as the harnessed energies of the atom were released. For five and six-tenths seconds the sharp, hard, beryllium-bronze leading edge of the back-sweeping V sliced its way through ever-thinning air.

The vessel seemed to pause momentarily; paused and bucked viciously. She shuddered and shivered, tried to tear herself into shreds and chunks; but Phryges in his tank was unconcerned. Earlier, weaker ships went to pieces against the solid-seeming wall of atmospheric incompressibility at the velocity of sound; but this one was built solidly enough, and powered to hit that wall hard enough, to go through unharmed.

The hellish vibration ceased; the fantastic violence of the drive subsided to a mere shove; Phryges knew that the vessel had leveled off at its cruising speed of two thousand miles per hour. He emerged, spilling the least possible amount of water upon the polished steel floor. He took off his coverall and stuffed it back through the valve into the tank. He mopped and polished the floor with towels, which likewise went into the tank.

He drew on a pair of soft gloves and by manual control jettisoned the acceleration tank and all the apparatus which had made that unloading possible. This junk would fall into the ocean; would sink, would never be found. He examined the compartment and the hatch minutely. No scratches, no scars, no mars; no tell-tale marks or prints of any kind. Let the Norskies search. So far, so good.

Back toward the trailing edge then, to a small escape hatch beside which was fastened a dull black ball. The anchoring devices went out first. He gasped as the air rushed out into near-vacuum, but he had been trained to take sudden and violent fluctuations in pressure. He rolled the ball out upon the hatch where he opened it. Two hinged hemispheres, each heavily padded with molded composition resembling sponge rubber. It seemed incredible that a man as big as Phryges, especially when wearing a parachute, could be crammed into a space so small. But that lining had been molded to fit.

This ball had to be small. The ship, even though it was on a regularly scheduled commercial flight, would be scanned intensively and continuously from the moment of entering Norheiman radar range. Since the ball would be invisible on any radar screen, no suspicion would be aroused; particularly since—as far as Atlantean Intelligence had been able to discover—the Norheimans had not yet succeeded in perfecting any device by the use of which a living man could bail out of a supersonic plane.

Phryges waited—and waited—until the second hand of his watch marked the arrival of zero time. He curled up into one half of the ball; the other half closed over him and plummeted downward; slowing abruptly, with a horrible deceleration, to terminal velocity. Had the air been any trifle thicker the Atlantean captain would have died then and there; but that, too, had been computed accurately and Phryges lived.

And as the ball bulleted downward on a screaming slant, it *shrank!*

This, too, the Atlanteans hoped, was new—a synthetic which air-friction would erode away, molecule by molecule, so rapidly that no perceptible fragment of it would reach ground.

The casing disappeared, and the yieldingly porous lining. And Phryges, still at an altitude of over thirty thousand feet, kicked away the remaining fragments of his cocoon and, by judicious planing, turned himself so that he could see the ground, now dimly visible in the first dull gray of dawn. There was the highway, paralleling his line of flight; he wouldn't miss it by more than a hundred yards.

He fought down an almost overwhelming urge to pull his ripcord too soon. He had to wait—wait until the last possible second—because parachutes were big and Norheiman radar practically swept the ground.

Low enough at last, he pulled the ring, *Z-r-r-e-e-k*—WHAP! The chute banged open; his harness tightened with a savage jerk, mere seconds before his hard-sprung knees took the shock of landing.

That was close—too close! He was white and shaking, but unhurt, as he gathered in the billowing, fighting sheet and rolled it, together with his harness, into a wad. He broke open a tiny ampoule, and as the drops of liquid touched it the stout fabric began to disappear. It did not burn; it simply disintegrated and vanished. In less than a minute there remained only a few steel snaps and rings, which the Atlantean buried under a meticulously replaced circle of sod.

He was still on schedule. In less than three minutes the signal would be on the air and he would know where he was—unless the Norsks had succeeded in finding and eliminating the whole Atlantean undercover group. He pressed a stud on a small instrument; held it down. A line burned green across the dial—flared red—vanished.

"Damn!" he breathed, explosively. The strength of the signal told him that he was within a mile or so of the hideout—first-class computation—but the red flash warned him to keep away. Kinnexa—*it had better be Kinnexa!*—would come to him.

How? By air? Along the road? Through the woods on foot? He had no way of knowing—talking, even on a tight beam, was out of the question. He made his way to the highway and crouched behind a tree. Here she could come at him by any route of the three. Again he waited, pressing infrequently a stud of his sender.

A long, low-slung ground-car swung around the curve and Phryges' binoculars were at his eyes. It *was* Kinnexa—or a duplicate. At the thought he dropped the glasses and pulled his guns—blaster in right hand, air-pistol in left. But no, that wouldn't do. She'd be suspicious, too—she'd have to be—and that car probably mounted heavy stuff. If he stepped out ready for business she'd fry him, and quick. Maybe not—she might have protection—but he couldn't take the chance.

The car slowed; stopped. The girl got out, examined a front tire, straightened up, and looked down the road, straight at Phyrges' hiding place. This time the binoculars brought her up to a little more than arm's length. Tall, blonde, beautifully built; the slightly crooked left eyebrow. The thread-line of gold betraying a one-tooth bridge and the tiny scar on her upper lip, for both of which he had been responsible—she always did insist on playing cops-and-robbers with boys older and bigger than herself—it *was* Kinnexa! Not even Norheim's science could imitate so perfectly every personalizing characteristic of a girl he had known ever since she was knee-high to a duck!

The girl slid back into her seat and the heavy car began to move. Open-handed, Phryges stepped out into its way. The car stopped.

"Turn around. Back up to me, hands behind you," she directed, crisply.

The man, although surprised, obeyed. Not until he felt a finger exploring the short hair at the back of his neck did he realize what she was seeking—the almost imperceptible scar marking the place where she bit him when she was seven years old!

"Oh, Fry! It is you! *Really* you! Thank the gods I've been ashamed of that all my life, but now . . ."

He whirled and caught her as she slumped, but she did not quite faint.

"Quick; Get in . . . drive on . . . not too fast!" she cautioned, sharply, as the tires began to scream. "The speed limit along here is seventy, and we can't be picked up."

"Easy it is, Kinny. But *give!* What's the score? Where's Kolanides? Or rather, what happened to him?"

"Dead. So are the others, I think. They put him on a psycho-bench and turned him inside out."

"But the blocks?"

"Didn't hold—over here they add such trimmings as skinning and salt to the regular psycho routine. But none of them knew anything about me, nor about how their reports were picked up, or I'd have been dead, too. But it doesn't make any difference, Fry—we're just one week too late."

"What do you mean, too late? Speed it up!" His tone was rough, but the hand he placed on her arm was gentleness itself.

"I'm telling you as fast as I can. I picked up his last report day before yesterday. They have missiles just as big and just as fast as ours—maybe more so—and they are going to fire one at Atlantis tonight at exactly seven o'clock."

"Tonight! Holy gods!" The man's mind raced.

"Yes." Kinnexa's voice was low, uninflected. "And there was nothing in the world that I could do about it. If I approached any one of our places, or tried to use a beam strong enough to reach anywhere, I would simply have got picked up, too. I've thought and thought, but could figure out only one thing that might possibly be of any use, and I couldn't do that alone. But two of us, perhaps . . ."

"Go on. Brief me. Nobody ever accused you of not having a brain, and you know this whole country like the palm of your hand."

"Steal a ship. Be over the ramp at exactly Seven Pay Emma. When the lid opens, go into a full-power dive, beam Artomenes—if I have a second before they blanket my wave—and meet their rocket head-on in their own launching-tube."

This was stark stuff, but so tense was the moment and so highly keyed up were the two that neither of them saw anything out of the ordinary in it.

"Not bad, if we can't figure out anything better. The joker being, of course, that you didn't see how you could steal a ship?"

"Exactly. I can't carry blasters. No woman in Norheim is wearing a coat or a cloak now, so I can't either. And just look at this dress! Do you see any place where I could hide even one?"

He looked, appreciatively, and she had the grace to blush.

"Can't say that I do," he admitted. "But I'd rather have one of our own ships, if we could make the approach. Could both of us make it, do you suppose?"

"Not a chance. They'd keep at least one man inside all the time. Even if we killed everybody outside, the ship would take off before we could get close enough to open the port with the outside controls."

"Probably. Go on. But first, are you sure that you're in the clear?"

"Positive." She grinned mirthlesly. "The fact that I am still alive is conclusive evidence that they didn't find out anything about me. But I don't want you to work on that idea if you can think of a better one. I've got passports and such for you to be anything you want to be, from a tubeman up to an Ekoptian banker. Ditto for me, and for us both. As Mr. and Mrs."

"Smart girl." He thought for minutes, then shook his head. "No possible way out that I can see. The sneak-boat isn't due for a week, and from what you've said it probably won't get here. But you might make it, at that. I'll drop you somewhere . . ."

"You will not," she interrupted, quietly but definitely. "Which would *you* rather—go out in a blast like that one will be, beside a good Atlantean, or, after deserting him, be psychoed, skinned, salted, and—still alive—drawn and quartered?"

"Together, then, all the way," he assented. "Man and wife. Tourists—newlyweds—from some town not too far away. Pretty well fixed, to match what we're riding in. Can do?"

"Very simple." She opened a compartment and selected one of a stack of documents. "I can fix this one up in ten minutes. We'll have to dispose of the rest of these, and a lot of other stuff, too. And you had better get out of that leather and into a suit that matches this passport photo."

"Right. Straight road for miles, and nothing in sight either way. Give me the suit and I'll change now. Keep on going or stop?"

"Better stop, I think," the girl decided. "Quicker, and we'll have to find a place to hide or bury this evidence."

While the man changed clothes, Kinnexa collected the contraband, wrapping it up in the discarded jacket. She looked up just as Phryges was adjusting his coat. She glanced at his armpits then stared.

"Where are your blasters?" she demanded. "They ought to show, at least a little, and even I can't see a sign of them."

He showed her.

"But they're so tiny! I never saw blasters like that!"

"I've got a blaster, but it's in the tail pocket. These aren't. They're air-guns. Poisoned needles. Not worth a damn beyond a hundred feet, but deadly close up. One touch anywhere and the guy dies right then. Two seconds max."

"Nice!" She was no shrinking violet, this young Atlantean spy. "You have spares, of course, and I can hide two of them easily enough in leg-holsters. Gimme, and show me how they work."

"Standard controls, pretty much like blasters. Like so." He demonstrated, and as he drove sedately down the highway the girl sewed industriously.

The day wore on, nor was it uneventful. One incident, in fact—the detailing of which would serve no useful purpose here—was of such a nature that at its end:

"Better pin-point me, don't you think, on that ramp?" Phryges asked, quietly. "Just in case you get scragged in one of these brawls and I don't?"

"Oh! Of course! Forgive me, Fry—it slipped my mind completely that you didn't know where it was. Area six; pin-point four seven three dash six oh five."

"Got it." He repeated the figures.

But neither of the Atlanteans was "scragged," and at six P.M. an allegedly honeymooning couple parked their big roadster in the garage at Norgrad Field and went through the gates. Their papers, tickets included, were in perfect order; they were as inconspicuous and as undemonstrative as newlyweds are wont to be. No more so, and no less.

Strolling idly, gazing eagerly at each new thing, they made their circuitous way toward a certain small hangar. As the girl had said, this field boasted hundreds of supersonic fighters, so many that servicing was a round-the-clock routine. In that hangar was a sharp-nosed, stubby-V'd flyer, one of Norheim's fastest. It was serviced and ready.

It was too much to hope, of course, that the visitors could actually get into the building unchallenged. Nor did they.

"Back, you." A guard waved them away. "Get back to the Concourse, where you belong—no visitors allowed out here!"

F-f-t! F-f-t! Phryges' air-guns broke into soft but deadly coughing. Kinnexa whirled—hands flashing down, skirt flying up—and ran. Guards tried to head her off; tried to bring their own weapons to bear. Tried—failed—died.

Phryges, too, ran; ran backward. His blaster was out now and flaming, for no living enemy remained within needle range. A rifle bullet *w-h-i-n-g-e-d* past his head, making him duck involuntarily and uselessly. Rifles were bad; but their hazard, too, had been considered and had been accepted.

Kinnexa reached the fighter's port, opened it, sprang in. He jumped. She fell against him. He tossed her clear, slammed and dogged all doors. He looked at her then, and swore bitterly. A small, round hole marred the bridge of her nose; the back of her head was gone.

He leaped to the controls and the fleet little ship screamed skyward. He cut in transmitter and receiver, keyed and twiddled briefly. No soap. He had been afraid of that. They were already blanketing every frequency he could employ; using power through which he could not drive even a tight beam a hundred miles.

But he could still crack that missile in its tube. Or—could he? He was not afraid of other Norheiman fighters; he had a long lead and he rode one of their very fastest. But since they were already so suspicious, wouldn't they launch the bomb *before* seven o'clock? He tried vainly to coax another knot out of his wide-open engines.

With all his speed, he neared the pin-point just in time to see a trail of super-heated vapor extending up into and disappearing beyond the stratosphere. He nosed his flyer upward, locked the missile into his sights, and leveled off. Although his ship did not have the giant rocket's acceleration, he could catch it before it got to Atlantis, since he did not need its altitude and since most of its journey would be made without power. What he could do about it after he caught it he did not know, but he'd do *something.*

He caught it; and, by a feat of piloting to be appreciated only by those who have handled planes at supersonic speeds, he matched its course and velocity. Then, from a distance of barely a hundred feet, he poured his heaviest shells into the missile's warhead. He *couldn't* be missing! It was worse than shooting sitting ducks—it was like dynamiting fish in a bucket! Nevertheless, nothing happened. The thing wasn't fused for impact, then, but for time; and the activating mechanism would be shell-and-shockproof.

But there was still a way. He didn't need to call Artomenes now, even if he could get through the interfrence which the fast approaching pursuers were still sending out. Atlantean observers would have lined this stuff up long since; the Officer would know exactly what was going on.

Driving ahead and downward, at maximum power, Phryges swung his ship slowly into a right-angle collision course. The fighter's needle nose struck the war-head within a foot of the Atlantean's point of aim, and as he died Phryges knew that he had accomplished his mission. Norheim's missile would not strike Atlantis, but would fall at least ten miles short, and the water there was very deep. Very, *very* deep. Atlantis would not be harmed.

It might have been better, however, if Phryges had died with Kinnexa on Norgrad Field; in which case the continent would probably have endured. As it was, while that one missile did not reach the city, its frightful atomic charge exploded under a hundred fathoms of water, ten scant miles from Atlantis' harbor, and very close to an ancient geological fault.

Artomenes, as Phryges had surmised, had had time in which to act, and he knew much more than Phryges did about what was coming toward Atlantis. Too late, he knew that not one missile, but seven, had been launched from Norheim, and at least five from Uighar. The retaliatory rockets which were to wipe out Norgrad, Uigharstoy, and thousands of square miles of environs were on their way long before either bomb or earthquake destroyed the Atlantean launching ramps.

But when equilibrium was at last restored, the ocean rolled serenely where a minor continent had been.

Vague as the historical events appear, Mankind's progress up the ladder toward its intangible utopia is clearly seen now. A definite pattern had developed. Every step upward had ended with a misstep; backsliding, in which Man lost what he seemed to have gained, served to urge him to greater effort. Egypt, Greece and Rome flourished until, in turn, the barbarians brought the Dark Ages. Another great era was ready to commence.

LETTER TO A PHOENIX

by Fredric Brown

THERE IS much to tell you, so much that it is difficult to know where to begin. Fortunately, I have forgotten most of the things that have happened to me. Fortunately, the mind has a limited capacity for remembering. It would be horrible if I remembered the details of a hundred and eighty thousand years—the details of four thousand lifetimes that I have lived since the first great atomic war.

Not that I have forgotten the really great moments. I remember being on the first expedition to land on Mars and the third to land on Venus. I remember—I believe it was in the third great war—the blasting of Skoro from the sky by a force that compares to nuclear fission as a nova compares to our slowly dying sun. I was second in command of a Hyper-A Class spacer in the war against the second extragalactic invaders, the ones who established bases on Jupe's moons before we knew we were there and then almost drove us out of the Solar System before we found the one weapon they couldn't stand up against. So they fled where we couldn't follow them, then, outside of the Galaxy. When we did follow them, about fifteen thousand years later, they were gone. They were dead three thousand years.

And that is what I want to tell you about—that mighty race and the others—but first, so that you will know how I know what I know, I will tell you about myself.

I am not immortal. There is only one immortal being in the universe; of it, more anon. Compared to it, I am of no importance, but you will not understand or believe what I say to you unless you understand what I am.

There is little in a name, and that is a fortunate thing—for I do not remember mine. That is less strange than you think, for a hundred and eighty thousand years is a long time and for one reason or another I have changed my name a thousand times or more. And what could matter less than the name my parents gave me a hundred and eighty thousand years ago?

I am not a mutant. What happened to me happened when I was twenty-three years old, during the first atomic war. The first war, that is, in which both sides used atomic weapons—puny weapons, of course, compared to subsequent ones. It was less than a score of years after the discovery of the atom bomb. The first bombs were dropped in a minor war while I was still a child. They ended that war quickly for only one side had them.

The first atomic war wasn't a bad one—the first one never is. I was lucky for, if it had been a bad one—one which ended a civilization—I'd not have survived it despite the biological accident that happened to me. If it had ended a civilization, I wouldn't have been kept alive during the sixteen-year sleep period I went through about thirty years later. But again I get ahead of the story.

I was, I believe, twenty or twenty-one years old when the war started. They didn't take me for the army right away because I was not physically fit. I was suffering from a rather rare disease of the pituitary gland—Somebody's syndrome. I've forgotten the name. It caused obesity, among other things. I was about fifty pounds overweight for my height and had little stamina. I was rejected without a second thought.

About two years later my disease had progressed slightly, but other things had progressed more than slightly. By that time the army was taking anyone; they'd have taken a one-legged one-armed blind man if he was willing to fight. And I was willing to fight. I'd lost my family in a dusting, I hated my job in a war plant, and I had been told by doctors that my disease was incurable and I had only a year or two to live in any case. So I went to what was left of the army, and what was left of the army took me without a second thought and sent me to the nearest front, which was ten miles away. I was in the fighting one day after I joined.

Now I remember enough to know that *I* hadn't anything to do with it, but it happened that the time I joined was the turn of the tide. The other side was out of bombs and dust and getting low on shells and bullets. We were out of bombs and dust, too, but they hadn't knocked out *all* of our production facilities and we'd got just about all of theirs. We still had planes to carry them, too, and we still had the semblance of an organization to send the planes to the right places. Nearly the right places, anyway; sometimes we dropped them too close to our own troops by mistake. It was a week after I'd got into the fighting that I got out of it again—knocked out of it by one of our smaller bombs that had been dropped about a mile away.

I came to, about two weeks later, in a base hospital, pretty badly burned. By that time the war was over, except for the mopping up, and except for restoring order and getting the world started up again. You see, that hadn't been what I call a blow-up war. It killed off—I'm just guessing; I don't remember the fraction—about a fourth or a fifth of the world's population. There was enough productive capacity left, and there were enough people left, to keep on going; there were dark ages for a few centuries, but there was no return to savagery, no starting over again. In such times, people go back to using candles for light and burning wood for fuel, but not because they don't know how to use electricity or mine coal; but because the confusions and revolutions keep them off balance for a while. The knowledge is there, in abeyance, until order returns.

It's not like a blow-up war, when nine-tenths or more of the population of Earth—or of Earth and the other planets—is killed. Then is when the world reverts to utter savagery and the hundredth generation rediscovers metals to tip their spears.

But again I digressed. After I recovered consciousness in the hospital, I was in pain for a long time. There were, by then, no more anaesthetics. I had deep radiation burns, from which I suffered almost intolerably for the first few months until, gradually, they healed. I did not sleep—that was the strange thing. And it was a terrifying thing, then, for I did not understand what had happened to me, and the unknown is always terrifying. The doctors paid little heed—for I was one of millions burned or otherwise injured—and I think they did not believe my statements that I had not slept at all. They thought I had slept but little and that I was either exaggerating or making an honest error. But I had *not* slept at all. I did not sleep until long after I left the hospital, cured. Cured, incidentally, of the disease of my pituitary gland, and with my weight back to normal, my health perfect.

I didn't sleep for thirty years. Then *I did sleep,* and I slept for sixteen years. And at the end of that forty-six year period, I was still, physically, at the apparent age of twenty-three.

Do you begin to see what had happened as I began to see it then? The radiation—or combination of types of radiation—I had gone through, had radically changed the functions of my pituitary. And there were other factors involved. I studied endocrinology once, about a hundred and fifty thousand years ago, and I think I found the pattern. If my calculations were correct, what happened to me was one chance in a billion.

The factors of decay and aging were not eliminated, of course, but the rate was reduced by about fifteen thousand times. I age at the rate of one day every forty-five years. So I am not immortal. I have aged eleven years in the past hundred and eighty millennia. My physical age is now thirty-four.

And forty-five years is to me as a day. I do not sleep for about thirty years of it—then I sleep for about fifteen. It is well for me that my first few "days" were not spent in a period of complete social disorganization or savagery, else I would not have survived my first few sleeps. But I did survive them and by that time I had learned a system and could take care of my own survival. Since then, I have slept about four thousand times, and I have survived. Perhaps someday I shall be unlucky. Perhaps someday, despite certain safegards, someone will discover and break into the cave or vault into which I seal myself, secretly, for a period of sleep. But it is not likely. I have years in which to prepare each of those places and the experience of four thousand sleeps back of me. You could pass such a place a thousand times and never know it was there, nor be able to enter if you suspected.

No, my chances for survival between my periods of waking life are much better than my chances of survival during my conscious, active periods. It is perhaps a miracle that I have survived so many of those, despite the techniques of survival that I have developed.

And those techniques are good. I've lived through seven major atomic—and super-atomic—wars that have reduced the population of Earth to a few savages around a few campfires in a few still habitable areas. And at other times, in other eras, I've been in five galaxies besides our own.

I've had several thousand wives but always one at a time for I was born in a monogamous era and the habit has persisted. And I have raised several thousand children. Of course, I have never been able to remain with one wife longer than thirty years before I must disappear, but thirty years is long enough for both of us—especially when she ages at a normal rate and I age imperceptibly. Oh, it leads to problems, of course, but I've been able to handle them. I always marry, when I do marry, a girl as much younger than myself as possible, so the disparity will not become too great. Say I am thirty; I marry a girl of sixteen. Then when it is time that I must leave her, she is forty-six and I am still thirty. And it is best for both of us, for everyone, that when I awaken I do not again go back to that place. If she still lives, she will be past sixty and it would not be well, even for her, to have a husband come back from the dead—still young. And I have left her well provided, a wealthy widow—wealthy in money or in whatever may have constituted wealth in that particular era. Sometimes it has been beads and arrowheads, sometimes wheat in a granary and once—there have been peculiar civilizations—it was fishing scales. I have never had the slightest difficulty in acquiring my share, or more, of money or its equivalent. A few thousand years' practice and the difficulty becomes the other way—knowing when to stop in order not to become unduly wealthy and so attract attention.

For obvious reasons, I've always managed to do that. For reasons that you will see I've never wanted power, nor have I ever—after the first few hundred years—let people suspect that I was different from them. I even spend a few hours each night lying thinking, pretending to sleep.

But none of that is important, any more than I am important. I tell it to you only so you will understand how I know the thing that I am about to tell you.

And when I tell you, it is not because I'm trying to sell you anything. It's something you can't change if you want to, and—when you understand it—you won't want to.

I'm not trying to influence you or to lead you. In four thousand lifetimes I've been almost everything—except a leader. I've avoided that. Oh, often enough I have been a god among savages, but that was because I had to be one in order to survive. I used the powers they thought were magic only to keep a degree of order, never to lead them, never to hold them back. If I taught them to use the bow and arrow, it was because game was scarce and we were starving and my survival depended upon theirs. Seeing that the pattern was necessary, I have never disturbed it.

What I tell you now will not disturb the pattern.

It is this: The human race is the only immortal organism in the universe.

There have been other races, but they have died away or they will die. We charted them once, a hundred thousand years ago, with an instrument that detected the presence of thought, the presence of intelligence, however alien and at whatever distance—and gave us a measure of that mind and its qualities. And fifty thousand years later that instrument was rediscovered. There were about as many races as before but only eight of them were ones that had been there fifty thousand years ago and each of those eight was dying, senescent. They had passed the peak of their powers and they were dying.

They had reached the limit of their capabilities—and there is always a limit—and they had no choice but to die. Life is dynamic; it can never be static—at however high or low a level—and survive.

That is what I am trying to tell you, so that you will never again be afraid. Only a race that destroys itself and its progress periodically, that goes back to its beginning, can survive more than, say, a hundred thousand years of intelligent life.

In all the universe only the human race has ever reached a high level of intelligence without reaching a high level of sanity. We are unique. We are already at least five times as old as any other race has ever been and it is because we are not sane. And man has, at times, had glimmerings of the fact that insanity is divine. But only at high levels of culture does he realize that he is collectively insane, that fight against it as he will he will always destroy himself—and rise anew out of the ashes.

The phoenix, the bird that periodically immolates itself upon a flaming pyre to rise new-born and live again for another millennium, and again and forever, is only metaphorically a myth. It exists and there is only one of it.

You are the phoenix.

Nothing will ever destroy you, now that—during many high civilizations—your seed has been scattered on the planets of a thousand suns, in a hundred galaxies, there ever to repeat the pattern. The pattern that started a hundred and eighty thousand years ago—I think.

I cannot be sure of that for I have seen that the twenty to forty thousand years that elapse between the fall of one civilization and the rise of the next destroy all traces. In twenty to forty thousand years memories become legends and legends become superstitions and even the superstitions become lost. Metals rust and corrode back into earth while the wind and the rain and the jungle erode and cover stone. The contours of the very continents change—and glaciers come and go, and a city of forty thousand years before is under miles of earth and miles of water.

So I cannot be sure. Perhaps the first blow-up that I knew was not the first; civilization may have risen and fallen before my time. If so, it merely strengthens the case I put before you to say that mankind *may* have survived more than the hundred and eighty thousand years I know of, may have lived through more than the six blow-ups that have happened since what I think to have been the first discovery of the phoenix's pyre.

But—except that we scattered our seed to the stars so well that even the dying of the sun or its becoming a nova would not destroy us—the past does not matter. Lur, Candra, Thragan, Kah, Mu, Atlantis—those are the six I have known, and they are gone as thoroughly as this one will be twenty thousand years or so hence, but the human race, here or in other galaxies, will survive and will live forever.

It will help your peace of mind, here in the year 1950 of your current era, to know that—for your minds are disturbed. Perhaps, I do not know, it will help your thoughts to know that the coming atomic war, the one that will probably happen in your generation, will not be a blow-up war; it will come too soon for that, before you have developed the really destructive weapons man has had so often before. It will set you back, yes. There will be darkish ages for a century or a few centuries. Then, with the memory of what you will call World War III as a warning, man will think—as he has always thought after a mild atomic war—that he has conquered his own insanity.

For a while—if the pattern holds—he will hold it in check. He will reach the stars again, to find himself already there. Why, you'll be back on Mars within five hundred years, and I'll go there too, to see again the canals I once helped to dig. I've not been there for eighty thousand years and I'd like to see what time has done to it and to those of us who were cut off there the last time mankind lost the space drive. Of course they've followed the pattern too, but the rate is not necessarily constant. We may find them at any stage in the cycle except the top. If they were at the top of the cycle, we wouldn't have to go to them—they'd come to us. Thinking, of course, as they think by now, that they are Martians.

I wonder how high, this time, you will get? Not quite as high, I hope, as Thragan. I hope that never again is rediscovered the weapon Thragan used against her colony on Skoro, which was then the fifth planet until the Thragans blew it into asteroids. Of course that weapon would be developed only long after intergalactic travel again becomes commonplace. If I see it coming I'll get out of the Galaxy, but I'd hate to have to do that. I like Earth and I'd like to spend the rest of my mortal lifetime on it if it lasts that long.

Possibly it won't, but the human race will last. Everywhere and forever, for it will never be sane and only insanity is divine. Only the mad destroy themselves and all they have wrought.

And only the phoenix lives forever.

Instead of reconstruction measured by thousands of years, Mankind's flight had become swift. Within two hundred years after the invention of the steam engine, Man had harnessed atomic energy. And, once again true to the pattern, Mankind was ready to destroy everything. The time had come in the twentieth century for Man, on the verge of conquering space, to overcome his greatest obstacle to progress—himself.

UNITE AND CONQUER

by Theodore Sturgeon

THEY WERE digging this drainage canal, and the timekeeper drove out to the end, where the big crane-dragline was working, and called the operator down to ask a lot of questions about a half-hour of overtime. Next thing you know, they were going round and round on the fill. The young superintendent saw the fight and yelled for them to cut it out. They ignored him. Not wanting to dirty his new breeches, the super swung up into the machine, loaded three yards of sand into the bucket, hoisted it high, swung and dumped it on the scrambling pair. The operator and the timekeeper floundered out from under, palmed sand out of their eyes and mouths, and with a concerted roar, converged on the cab of the machine. They had the super out on the ground and were happily taking turns at punching his head when a labor-foreman happened by, and he and his men stopped the fuss.

The red-headed youngster put down the book. "It's true here, too," he told his brother. "I mean, what I was saying about almost all of Wells' best science-fiction. In each case there is a miracle—a Martian invasion in 'War of the Worlds,' a biochemical in 'Food of the Gods,' and a new gaseous isotope in 'In the Days of the Comet.' And it ultimately makes all of mankind work together."

The brother was in college—had been, for seven months—and was very wise. "That's right. He knew it would take a miracle. I think he forgot that when he began to write sociological stuff. As Dr. Pierce remarked, he sold his birthright for a pot of message."

"Excuse me," said the dark man called Rod. He rose and went to the back of the café and the line of phone booths, while the girl with the tilted nose and the red sandals stared fondly after him. The Blonde arrived.

"Ah," she mewed, "alone, I see. But, of course." She sat down.

"I'm with Rod," said the girl with the sandals, adding primly, "He's phoning."

"Needed someone to talk to, no doubt," said the Blonde.

"Probably," said the other, smiling at her long fingers, "he needed to come back to earth."

The Blonde barely winced. "Oh well. I suppose he must amuse himself between his serious moments. He'll have one tomorrow night, you know. At the Ball. Pity I won't see you there. Unless, of course, you come with someone else—"

"He's working tomorrow night!" blurted the girl with the sandals, off guard.

"You could call it that," said the Blonde placidly.

"Look, Sunshine," said the other girl evenly, "why don't you stop kidding yourself? Rod isn't interested in you and your purely local color. He isn't even what you want. If you're looking for a soul-mate, go find yourself a wolfhound."

"Darling," said the Blonde appreciatively, and with murder in her mascara. "You know, you might get him, at that. *If* you brush up on your cooking, and if he can keep his appetite by going blind—" She leaned forward suddenly. "Look there. Who *is* that floozy?"

They turned to the back of the café. The dark young man was holding both hands of a slender but curvesome girl with deep auburn hair. She was laughing coyly up at him.

"Fancy Pants," breathed the girl with the red sandals. She turned to the Blonde. "I know whereof I speak. Her clothesline is right under my window, and—"

"The little stinker," said the Blonde. She watched another pretty convulsion of merriment. "Clothesline, hm-m-m? Listen—I had a friend once who had a feud on with a biddy in the neighborhood. There was something about a squirt gun and some ink—"

"Well, well," said the girl in the sandals. She thought a moment, watching Rod and the redhead. "Where could I get a squirt gun?"

"My kid brother has a water pistol. I got it for him for his birthday. Can you meet me here at seven o'clock?"

"I certainly can. I'll get the ink. Black ink. *India* ink!"

The Blonde rose. "Be sweet to him," she said swiftly, "so he won't guess who fixed Fancy Pants."

"I will. But not too sweet. The heel. Darling, you're wonderful—"

The Blonde winked and walked away. And at a nearby table, a gentleman, who had been eavesdropping shamelessly, stuffed a soft roll into an incipient roar of laughter, and then began to choke.

* * *

"Colonel Simmons," said the annunciator.

"Well for Pete's sake!" said Dr. Simmons. "Send him in. Send him right in! And—cancel that demonstration. No . . . don't cancel it. Postpone it."

"Until when, doctor?"

"Until I get there."

"But—it's for the Army—"

"My brother's the Army, too!" snapped the physicist and switched off.

A knock. "Come in. Leroy, you dog!"

"Well, Muscles." The colonel half ran into the room, gripped the scientist by the upper arms, scanned his face up, back and across. Their eyes were gray, the colonel's gray and narrow, the doctor's gray and wide. "It must've been—" they said in unison, and then laughed together.

"Eight years, anyway," said the colonel.

"All of that. Gosh, gosh." He shook his head. "You and your shiny buttons."

There was a silence. "Hardly know where to begin, what to say, hm-m-m?" grinned the colonel. "What've you been doing lately?"

"Oh . . . you know. Applied physics."

"Hah!" snorted the colonel. "Question: Mr. Michaelangelo, what are you doing? Answer: Mixing pigments. Come on, now; what since you invented magnefilm?"

"Nothing much. Couple of things too unimportant to talk about, couple more too important to mention."

"Your old garrulous self, I see. Come on, Muscles. Security regulations don't apply here, and between us especially."

That's what you think, thought Dr. Simmons. "Of course not," he said. "What branch are you with now?"

"Publicly, the Air Corps," said the colonel, indicating his wings. "Actually, I'm on the Board of Strategy. This won't be the kind of war which can be fought with semipublic conferences and decisions after advisement in the General Staff. The Board operates practically underground, without any publicity, and without any delay."

"Board of Strategy, eh? I'd heard only vaguely . . . and I'm in a position to hear plenty. Well now. When you say 'No delay,' what do you mean?"

"I mean this," said the colonel. He put his hands behind him on a high lab table and lifted himself up on it. He crossed his bright boots and swung them. "We have plans . . . look; you know how M-Day plans work, don't you?"

"Certainly. The personnel of draft boards is all chosen, the questionnaires are printed and almost entirely distributed, the leases and domains of examination centers are arranged for, and so on and on. When mobilization is called, everything starts operating without a hitch. You hope," he added with a grin. "Why?"

"The Board operates the same way," said his brother. "But where Selective Service has only one big problem to arrange for in detail we have—" he shrugged. "Name your figure. We have planned what to do, if, for example, Russia attacks us, if we attack Russia, if France attacks Brazil, or if Finland takes a swing at Iraq. What's funny?"

"I was thinking of the legend about the emperor who tried to grant the reward asked for by a certain hero, who had stipulated simply that he be given some wheat, the amount to be determined by a hypothetical chessboard, putting one grain on the first square, two on the second, four on the third, eight on the fourth, and so on . . . anyway, it wound up with an amount equal to a couple of years' world supply, and with the empire and all its resources in the hands of our hero. Your plans are like that. I mean, if one of the possibilities you mention should occur, but if you should lose the third battle instead of winning it as scheduled, why, you'll have a whole new set of plans to make. And this applies to every one of your original master-plans."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me. I don't mean that each plan is as detailed as the M-Day deal. Lord, no. The plans are policies of action, rather than blueprints. They stay within the bounds of statistical probability, though we push those bounds outward as far as possible. I've mentioned possible enemies, and possible combatants aside from enemies. There are also plans covering combinations and permutations of alliance. Anything is possible after such precedent, for example, as the situation in the Second War, when our close ally Russia was at peace with our worst enemy." He laughed. "If that happened in human instead of in international terms, with my closest friend lunching daily with a man who was openly trying to kill me, we'd call it fantastic. Maybe it is," he said cheerfully, "but it's most engrossing."

"You rather enjoy it, don't you?"

"I have never had such fascinating work in all my life."

"I didn't mean strategy, soldier-boy. I meant war."

"War? I s'pose it is. Now, another thing the Board is doing . . . wait a minute. Muscles! You're not still the dewy-eyed idealist you used to be—brotherhood of mankind, and all that, are you?"

"I invented the sonic disruptor, didn't I?" *You probably think that answers your question,* he thought bitterly.

"So you did. A very healthy development in you and in the noble art of warfare. Nicest little side arm in history. Busts a man all up inside without breaking the skin. So little mess."

Healthy! Dr. Simmons stared at his brother, who was looking into his cigarette case. *Healthy! And I developed the disruptor to focus ultrasonic vibrations under the skin, to homogenize cancerous tissue. I never dreamed they'd . . . ah, neither did Nobel.* "Go on about the Board," he said.

"What was I . . . oh yes. Not only have we planned the obvious things—political situations, international crises, campaigns and alliances, but we are keeping a very close watch on technology. The War Department has, at long last, abandoned the policy of fighting this war with last war's weapons. Remember how Hitler astonished the world with the elementary stunt of organizing liaison between his tanks and his dive bombers? Remember the difficulties they had in promoting the bazooka to replace the mortar in jungle warfare? And how the War Department refused to back the Wright Brothers? There'll be no more of that."

"You mean we're preparing to use the latest in everything? Really use it?"

"That's right. Atomic energy and jet propulsion we know about. Then there's biological warfare, both disease and crop-hormone techniques. But it doesn't stop there. As a matter of fact, those things, and other proven developments, account for only a small part of our plans. We have the go-ahead on supplies, weapons, equipment and techniques which haven't even been developed yet. Some haven't even been invented yet!"

Dr. Simmons whistled. "Like what?"

The colonel smiled, rolled his eyes up thoughtfully. "Like impenetrable force-fields, mass-multipliers—that's a cute hypothesis, Muscles. Increase the effective mass of a substance, and the results could be interesting. Particularly if it were radioactive. Antigravity. Telepath scrambles, which throw interrupting frequencies in and around thought waves, if thoughts *are* waves . . . we've considered practically every gadget and gimmick in every story and article in every science fiction magazine published in the last thirty years, and have planned what to do in case it suddenly pops up."

Ignoring all the utopian, philosophical, sociological stories, of course, thought Dr. Simmons. He said, "So your visit here isn't purely social?"

"Gosh no. I'm with the observation group which came here to see your Spy-Eye in action. What is it, anyhow? And how did it get the cute soapsuds name?"

Dr. Simmons smiled. "One of the armchair boys in the front office used to work in an advertising agency. The device is a 'Self-Propelled Information Interceptor'—SPII—which, once it touched that huckster brain, became 'Spy-Eye.' As to just what it is, you'll see that for yourself if you attend the demonstration, which starts as soon as we've finished talking."

"You mean you postponed it until I was through with you?"

"That's right." *I thought you'd like that,* he thought, watching the pleased grin on his brother's face. "Tell me something, Leroy. All these plans . . . are we at war?"

"Are we . . . well, no. You know that."

"But these preparations. All they lack is a timetable." He squinted quizzically. "By golly, I believe you have that, too."

"We have plenty," the colonel sidestepped, winking.

"Choose sides? What's the lineup?"

"I won't tell you that. No, I'm not worried about security! It's just that I might be wrong. Things move so fast these days. I'll tell you one thing, though. We already have our neutral ground."

"Oh yes, of course—like Switzerland and Sweden. I've always wondered what exact powers kept them neutral."

"Well, if you're going to fight a war, you've got to have some way to exchange prisoners and have meetings with various interested parties, and so on—"

"Yep. And it used to come in pretty handy for certain manufacturers."

The colonel eyed him. "Are you sure you're off that lion-and-lamb kick?"

Dr. Simmons grimaced. "I think the Spy-Eye can answer that quite adequately."

The colonel slipped off his perch. "Yes, let's get to it," he said eagerly.

They went to the door. "By the way," said Dr. Simmons, "just what have you picked out for your neutral ground?"

"Japan," said the colonel.

"Nice of 'em to agree to anything so close to home."

"Nice of 'em? Don't be silly! It's the only way they can be sure it won't be fortified."

"Oh," said his brother. They went out.

The demonstration went off without a hitch, and afterward the six Army observers and the plant technicians repaired to the projection room for Dr. Simmons' summation.

He talked steadily and tiredly, and his thoughts talked on at the same time. As he reeled off specifications and characteristics, his mind rambled along, sometimes following the spoken thought, sometimes paralleling it, sometimes commenting acidly or humorously, always tiredly. It was a trapped thing, that talking mind, but it was articulate.

". . . five point eight feet long overall, an aerodynamic streamline, with its largest diameter only two point three seven feet. Slide One, please. As you have seen, it has one propelling and three supporting jets. These three are coupled directly to the same outlet-valve, which is controlled by an absolute altimeter. The whole is, of course, gyro-stabilized. It is capable of trans-sonic speeds; but it can very nearly hover, subject only to a small nutation which can probably be designed out."

It was going to be a mail-rocket, commented his thought.

"Its equipment includes the usual self-guiding devices, a coding flight-recorder, and radio receivers tuned to various preselected FM, AM, and radar channels. In regard to radar; should it pick up any radar pulses close enough or strong enough to suggest detection, it changes course and speed radically. Should they persist, the Spy-Eye releases 'window'—aluminum-foil strips of various lengths, and returns to its starting point by a preset and devious course.

"The spy device itself is relatively simple. It uses magnefilm, taking pictures of the source of any desired radio signal. When the signal is received, it locates the beam, aims the camera, and records the audio signal magnetically. Of course, the synchronization between the picture and the audio recording is perfect, because of the magnefilm."

"Will you explain magnefilm, please, doctor?"

"Certainly, captain. It was developed through research into the rather wide variation in dielectric characteristics of the early plastics —the styrenes, ureas, and so on. Molecular arrangement was altered in various plastics until a transparent conductor was developed. It was not very far from that to the production of a plastic with a remarkably high magnetic density. Once this was made in a transparent, strong, pliable form, it was simple to make photographic film of it. The audio impulses are impressed directly upon the film, as in any magnetic tape system." *And it was invented for 8mm movie addicts, so that they could have sound film,* added his thought. *Now it's a secret weapon.*

"The purpose of the Spy-Eye, of course, is to pick up short-range transmissions; vertically beamed walkie-talkies, line-of-sight FM messages, and the like. Since these are usually well beyond the range of the enemy's listening-posts, they are seldom coded. Therefore, with this device, we have access to a wealth of intelligence that has so far been regarded as unreachable."

He signaled the projection room. The screen came to life. During the test, the various officers had spoken into the microphones of several AM and FM transmitters spotted within a quarter-mile. Unerringly, after a few spoken words, the screen showed the source and its identification numeral, painted on large white signboards.

"In enemy territory," remarked the doctor dryly, "we shall probably have to do without the boards." There was polite laughter. "If you will remember, gentlemen, the selector was next set to pick up something on the broadcast band."

The screen, blank, gave an agonized groan. Then a child's voice said clearly, "What's the matter, Daddy? Has that old acid indigestion got you down again?" "Owoo," said the man's voice. The screen suddenly showed, far below, the tall towers of a transmitting antenna.

"Honey Child, you'd better go for the doctor. Your old Daddy's real poorly." "No need to be," rejoined the little angelic voice. "I took my ice-cream money and brought you a package of Bubble-Up, the fastest relief known to the mind of man. It is only ten cents at the nearest drugstore. Here. Take one and drink this glass of water I brought you." *Glug-glug. Clink!* "Ah-h! I'm a new man!" "Now Daddy, here's my report card. I'm sorry. It's all D's." "Ha ha ha! Think nothing of it, Honey Child. Here—take this dollar. Take five dollars! Take all the other kids down for a treat!"

"Cut!" said Dr. Simmons. "I would consider this conclusive evidence, gentlemen, that the Spy-Eye can spot a target for bombing."

Amid laughter and applause, the lights came on. The observers pressed forward to shake the physicist's hand. Colonel Simmons stood by until the rest went to a table, where a technician was explaining the flight-record tapes and the course and radio-band pre-selector mechanisms.

"Muscles, it's fine. Just fine! How about duplication? I know there can be no leaks out of here, but do you think *they* will be able to figure it out quickly enough to get something like it into production?"

Dr. Simmons rubbed his chin. "That's hard to say. Aside from the fuel and the magnefilm, there's nothing new about the device except for the fact that old components are packed in a new box. The fuel can be duplicated, and magnefilm—well, that's a logical development."

"Well," said the colonel, "it can't matter too much. I mean, even if they have it already. We can blanket the earth with those things. There needn't be a single spot on the globe unobserved. The Spy-Eye doesn't have to detect radio alone, does it?"

"Lord, no! It could be built to seek infrared, or radioactivity, or even sound, though we'd have to tune the jets acoustically for that. The magnefilm's audio could pick up our own directional beams and get a radio fix on anything we wanted it to take pictures of. The camera could be triggered to a time mechanism, or to anything that radiated or vibrated. Likewise the hunting mechanism."

"Oh, fine," said the colonel again. "There'll be no power on earth that can't be spotted and smashed within hours, once we get enough of these things out."

"No power on earth," nodded his brother. "You have every reason to be confident." *And no reason to be right,* his silent voice added.

The first signs of the war to come were in all the papers. But hardly anyone read them. They were inside, with small headings. The front pages were more exciting that day. They screamed of new international incidents. The tabloids were full of a photo-series of the mobbing of a bearded man called Kronsky. (He was English—Somerset—and spoke the buzzing brogue of his shire. His name had been Polish, three generations before. He was wearing a beard because of scars caused by a severe attack of barber's itch. These facts were not touched upon.) An Estonian student was wrapped in a U.N. banner and stoned for having sung "Ol' Man River" at a folk-song recital. An astonishing number of tea-leaf readers were hired overnight by restaurants in which "Beef Stroganoff" suddenly became "Gypsy Goulash."

The small notices in the papers dealt with the startling discovery, by three experimenters, one in France and two in Canada, of a new noise in Jansky radiation, that faint hiss of jumbled radio frequencies which originates from somewhere an interstellar space. It was a triple blast of sound, each one two and two-fifths seconds in length, with two and two-fifths seconds of silence between the signals. They came in groups, three blasts each, a few fractions of a second under ten minutes apart. The phenomenon continued for seven months, during which time careful measurements showed an appreciable increase in amplitude. Either the signal source was getting stronger, or it was getting nearer, said the pundits.

During these seven months, and for longer, the Simmons brothers lapsed into their usual "got to write to him some time" pattern in regard to each other. Both were busy. The colonel's life was a continuous round of conferences, research reports, and demonstrations, and the load on the physicist became heavier daily, as the demands of the Board of Strategy, stimulated by its research, its Intelligence Section, and the perilous political situation, reached his laboratories.

The world was arming feverishly. A few historians and philosophers, in their very few objective moments, found time to wonder what the political analysts of the future would have to say about the coming war. The First War was a war of economic attrition; the Second was too, but it was even more an ideological war. This incipient unpleasantness had its source in ideology, but, at the eve of hostilities, the battle of philosophies had been relegated to the plane of philosophy. In practice, each side—or rather, *all* sides—had streamlined themselves into fighting machines, with each and every part milled to its function, and all control centralized. The necessary process of kindling fire to fight fire had resulted in soviets where the proletariat did not dictate, and in democracies where the people did not rule. Indeed, since the increase of governmental efficiency everywhere had resulted in a new high in production of every kind, the economic and political aspects of the war had been all but negated, and it began to appear as though the war would be fought purely for the sake of fighting a war, and simply because the world was prepared for it.

On December 7th, as if to perpetuate the memory of infamy, the first bomb was dropped.

It was *dropped.* It wasn't a self-guided missile. It wasn't a planted mine. It wasn't dust or bio, either; it was a blast-bomb, and it was a honey.

They got the ship that dropped it, too. A proximity-fused rocket with an atomic warhead struck it a glancing blow. That happened, spectacularly, over Lake Michigan. The ship, or what was left of it, crashed near Minsk.

It was Dr. Simmons' urgent suggestion which accounted for the ship. It had not been seen, but it had been spotted by radar on December 6th, when it encircled the Earth twice. It was far inside Roche's Limit; the conclusion was obvious that it was self-powered. Simmons calculated its orbit, knowing that at that velocity it could not alter its course appreciably in the few hours it took to pass and repass any given point. The proximity rocket was launched on schedule, not on detection. Unfortunately, on its way to its rendezvous with fission, the ship dropped its bomb.

And when that happened, the world drew itself together like . . . like— Ever see a cat lying sleeping, spread out, relaxed, and then some sound, some movement will put that cat on guard? It may not move a muscle, but it isn't relaxed any more; it isn't asleep any more. It has changed its pose from a slumber to a crouch, and you can only know that because of the new shape of its eyes. The world did that.

But nobody started throwing bombs.

"Cool down, soldier-boy!"

"Cool down, he says," fumed the colonel. "This is . . . this—" His words died into a splutter.

"I know, I know," said Dr. Simmons, trying not to grin. "You figured, and you figured, and you read all sorts of fantastic things and swallowed your incredulity and planned as if these things actually could happen. You worked all practicable statistical possibilities, and a lot more besides. And it has to start like this."

"Everybody *knows* Japan is neutral ground, and will stay that way. There's no *point* in it!" the colonel all but wailed. "The bomb didn't even land on a city, or even a depot! Just knocked the top off a mountain in the Makabe country on Honshu. There isn't a blasted thing there."

"I'd say there isn't an unblasted thing there at the moment," chuckled his brother. "Stop telling me how you feel and let's have what you know. Was the bomb traced?"

"Of course it was traced! We have recording radar all over. It came from that ship, all right. Muscles, it was a dinky little thing, that bomb. About like a two hundred fifty pounder. But what a blossom!"

"I heard the news reports on it. Also seismographics. They had trouble picking up the Hiroshima bomb. They didn't have any with this one. It ran about seven hundred and forty-odd times as powerful."

"Officially," said the colonel, "it was well over nine hundred at the source."

"Well, well," said Dr. Simmons, in the tone of an orchid fancier noting red spots on a new hybrid. "Disruption, hm-m-m?"

"Disruption, and how," rejoined the colonel. "Look, Muscles. We've got disruption bombs too—you know that. But just as a fission bomb blows away most of its fissionable material before it can be effective, so a disruption bomb blasts off that much more. We have bombs that make the old Baker-Day bomb look like a wet firecracker, sure; but the best we can do is about four hundred per cent. I thought that was plenty; but this thing— Anyhow, Muscles, I just don't get it. Who threw it? Why? Great day in the morning, man! An egg like that would've thrown us into a ground-loop if it had landed on any one of our centers. No power on earth would be that careless. To miss, I mean. We can't even be sure it wasn't a wild throw by one of our allies, on the other hand. Nowadays, you know everything, and you know nothing; you know it ahead of time, or you know it too late."

"My, my," said Dr. Simmons mildly. "What about the ship?"

"The ship," repeated the colonel, and his face reddened again. "I just can't believe that ship. Who built it? Where? We have everything on earth spotted that's worth spotting. Muscles, that thing was fifteen hundred feet long according to the radar."

"Anybody photograph it?"

"Apparently not. I mean, lots of radar-directed cameras shot where it was, but it didn't show, except as a blur."

"How do you know it was that big, then? You know what 'window' does to radar, for example. I don't know just how, but that could be camouflage of some sort."

"That's what we thought at first. Until we saw the hole in the ground where it hit. That thing was *big!*"

"Saw it? I understand that the Russians cordoned off the area and threatened mass bombing if anyone came smelling around."

"A thing called a Spy-Eye," said the colonel, "with a telescopic lens—"

"Oh," said the physicist. "Well—how much of the ship was left?"

"Not much. It exploded when it hit, of course. Apparently most of it was vaporized over Michigan. The Spy-Eye pix show something being dug up, though."

"Wish I had a piece of it," said Dr. Simmons longingly. "A thorough qualitative analysis would very soon show where it came from."

"We won't get it," said the colonel positively. "Not without the Russki's co-operation anyway."

"Could that happen?"

"Certainly not! They're not stupid! They'll play this thing for all it's worth. If they can figure out where it came from, they'll know and we won't—one up for them in the war of nerves. If they can't, and the sample's worthless to them, we can't know it until we try, and we want to try. So they'll hold out for some concession or other. Whatever it is will cost us plenty."

"Leroy," said the physicist slowly, "have you heard about the so-called 'signals' in the Jansky bands?"

"I know what you're driving at," snorted the colonel. "The answer is no. But really, *no.* That's no ship from outer space. We fixed on those signals months ago, and had even the 200-incher and a whole battery of image orthicons on the indicated direction. The signal strength increased, but nothing could be seen."

"Uh-huh. And when it arrived, it couldn't be photographed."

"It— Oh. Oh-oh!"

"Well, you said yourself that if it had been built anywhere on earth you'd have known it."

"Your phone," gasped the colonel. "I've got to find out about those Jansky signals." He rushed to the corner of the room.

"They stopped," said the doctor. "Yes, Leroy. I've been following them all along. They cut out when we shelled the ship."

"Th-they did?"

"Yup."

"Well—that takes care of that, doesn't it? Even if it was something from Outside—"

"Now," said Dr. Simmons relentlessly, "with that racket off the Jansky bands, it's possible to hear the new noises."

"New—"

"Three sets of 'em. By their amplitude, I'd judge that they're scheduled to be here in two, three, and five months respectively." The colonel gasped. *"I* think," added Dr. Simmons calmly, "that they're approaching faster than the first one."

"That can't be!" bellowed the colonel. "Haven't we enough to watch without fighting a Buck Rogers war as well? We just can't fight our own war and these invaders, too!"

"Come, come," said Dr. Simmons gently. "Why not take it up with the Board, Leroy? They're ready for everything. You told me so yourself."

The colonel glared at him. "This is no time to needle me, Muscles," he growled. "What do you think's going to happen?"

The scientist considered. "Well, what do you think would happen if you sent out—say, a plane to investigate an island? The plane circles it a couple of times, and then without warning gets shot down. What would you do?"

"Send a squadron and bomb the—" He fell silent.

"Yes, Leroy."

"But—they dropped the bomb first!"

"How do you know what they were doing? Put it on other terms; you are walking in the woods and you come to a mound of dry earth. You wonder what it is. You stick a piece of wood into it." He shrugged. "Maybe it's an ant hill. It would seem to me that an atomic bomb would be an excellent method to get a quick idea of the elemental composition of a strange planet. There's all kinds of light from the disruption, you know. Screen off what radiation you can expect from your own bomb, and what's left will give you a pretty fair spectral analysis of the target."

"But they must have known the planet was inhabited. What right had they to bomb it?"

"Did the bomb do any damage?"

The colonel was silent.

"And yet we shot the ship down. Leroy, you can't expect them to like it."

The soldier looked up suddenly, narrowly at his brother. "It was your idea to shoot it down."

"It was not!" Dr. Simmons snapped. "I was asked how it could be done, and I said how it could be done. That was all. The order was given by some eager lad in your Board, if anyone." He made an impatient gesture. "That's beside the point, Leroy. We can come out of our caves in the brave new postwar world and fix the blame to our hearts' content. Our problem at the moment is what to do when the next contingent arrives. I rather think they'll be loaded for bear. That was, you say, a big ship, and what it dropped was a small bomb. You can guess what will happen if three ships drop a few whole sticks of bombs like that—say a thousand of them."

"Three hundred would be enough to make this planet look like the moon," said the colonel whitely.

"I remember a lecture, long ago," said Dr. Simmons reminiscently, "by a man named Dr. Szilard. Someone asked him if there was any conceivable defense against the atomic bomb. He laughed and said, 'Certainly. The Japs discovered it in eight days.' "

"A defense? Oh. They surrendered."

"That's right. That stopped the bombs from coming over."

"How do you surrender to a force you can't communicate with?"

"Perhaps we can. We can try. But from their point of view we attacked first, and in all probability they'll hit first and talk later. You would."

"Yes," admitted the colonel. "I would. The thing to do, Muscles, is to try to organize some defense."

"With the world in the state it's in now? Don't be silly! There might be a chance if everyone believed, if every nation would co-operate. But if nobody trusts anybody—"

The colonel bolted to the door. "We'll have to do what we can. So long, Muscles. I'll keep you posted— What in blazes are you grinning for?"

"Don't mind me, please," said Dr. Simmons, half laughing. "It's nothing."

"Tell me what your nothing is so I can get to work with a clear mind," said the colonel irritably.

"Well, it's just that I've been expecting the well-known atomic doom for so *very* long, that I've covered every emotion but one over it. I've been afraid, even terrified. I've been angry. I've been disgusted. And now—it's funny. It's funny because of what you're going through. Of all the things you've guessed at, trained for, planned for—it has to come like this. Sitting ducks. An enemy you can't outthink, outweigh, outsmart, or terrorize. It was always inevitable; now even a soldier can see it."

"Very funny," growled the colonel, jamming his hat down. "Out of this world."

"Hey!" called the physicist. "That was good!"

Laughing, he went to his inner laboratory. The one where no one else ever went.

Their next contact was by telephone. Too much time had passed; at least, Dr. Simmons thought it was too much time. So he called his brother. Having determined to do so, it occurred to him that he did not know exactly how to go about it; so he called the War Department in Washington. It took two minutes and forty seconds to make the contact; but the doctor heard the Washington operator, the Chicago operator, the Denver operator, the Gunnison operator, the Gunnison mobile operator, and an Operations lieutenant passing along something called a crash pri. Dr. Simmons raised his eyebrows at this, and never forgot it.

"Hi, Muscles!"

"Hello, Leroy. Listen. What's with the salvage situation? I want to do that analysis."

"The stinkers!" the colonel said heatedly. "They made a proposition. I turned 'em down. The Board backed me up."

"What was the proposition?"

"They wouldn't send a sample. They said if we had someone who could perform a definitive analysis, to send him to Russia."

"Aha! Mountain to Mahomet, eh? Why did you refuse?"

"Don't be silly! There are maybe a half-dozen men in this country who might be able to make a really exhaustive analysis, and come up with a reliable conclusion. And about five of 'em we can't be sure."

"Send the other one, then."

"That's you, egghead. We're not going to run a risk like that."

"Why not?"

"They could use you, Muscles."

"I couldn't use anything they could give me."

"That isn't the point," the colonel assured him. "But they have ways—"

"Knock off the dramatics, Leroy. This isn't a grade B movie. And there isn't time for fooling around. We have maybe six weeks."

There was a silence. Then, "Only six weeks?"

"That's right," said the doctor positively. "Tell you what. Make arrangements to get me to Minsk right away, and let me get on that analysis. At worst we can find out what the ship was made of, and get an idea of how advanced those people are. At the very best, we might find a defense. Tell the 'proprietors' "—although this was a closed circuit, he was careful—"that my work will be open and aboveboard. They can put on as many observers as they want to, and I will share my findings completely with them."

"You can't do that! That's just what we want to avoid!"

It was the physicist's turn to fall silent. *How do you like that!* he thought. *The Board is clinging to some faint hope that the invaders will do their dirty work for them. They think that we'll find a defense and no one else will.* He said, finally, speaking slowly and carefully as if to a child, "Leroy, listen. I'm just as anxious as you are to do something about this matter. I think I can do something. But either I do it my way, or I don't do it at all. Is that quite clear? Perhaps I'm more resigned than you are. Perhaps I think we deserve this . . . are you there?"

"Yes." The doctor knew his brother had paused to lick his lips nervously. "You really think you can get something of value out of the analysis?"

"Almost certainly."

"I'll check with the Board. Muscles—"

"Yes, Leroy."

"Don't go mystic on us, hah?"

"Go see the Board," said Dr. Simmons, and hung up.

He went to Russia.

The colonel met him on his return, two weeks later at a West Coast field. The unarmed long-range jet fighter, and its bristling escort, which had accompanied it from Eniwetok, skimmed to the landing strip. The colonel had a two-place coupé sport plane waiting. Dr.

Simmons, inordinately cheerful, refused a meal and said he wanted to take off right away for his laboratories. The colonel wanted him to appear before the Board for a report, but he smiled and shook his head, and the colonel knew that smile better than to argue.

When they reached traveling altitude, and the colonel had throttled down to stay under the sonic barrier, and they had the susurrus of driving jets to accompany them rather than the roar of climbing jets to compete, they talked.

"How was it, Muscles?"

"Oh, I had a ball. It was *fine.*"

The colonel shot a look at him. *He disapproves,* thought the doctor. *War is grim and businesslike, and for anyone to enjoy the business of war seems to him a sacrilege.*

"It looked pretty touchy at first. They all acted as if I had an A-bomb in my watch pocket. Then I ran into Iggy."

"Iggy?"

"Yup. I could recite his whole name if I tried hard, but it's a jawbreaker. We used to drink forbidden sherry together in the dorm at the University of Virginia when I was a kid in school. We thrashed out all the truths of the cosmos together. He was a swell guy. I remember once when Iggy decided that the rule forbidding women in the dorm was unreasonable. He rigged up a—"

"What happened in Minsk?" asked the colonel coldly.

"Oh. Minsk. Well, Iggy's come a long way since college. He specialized in aerodynamics, and then got tired of it. For years he'd been fooling around with nuclear physics as a hobby, and during the Second War he got real high up in the field. Naturally he was called in when this ship nosed in at Minsk."

"Why naturally?"

"Well, the fragment retained much of its shape. That's aerodynamics. And it was hot—really hot. That's nuclear physics. He was a big help. According to his extrapolations, by the way, your radar was right. If that was a part of the hull, as it probably was, and if it was a more or less continuous curve, then the ship must've been all of fifteen hundred feet long, with a four hundred-foot cross-section at max. Quite a piece of business."

"I can't say I'm happy to hear about it. Go on."

"Well, the high brass there apparently expected me to smell the fragment, taste it, and come up with a trade name. There was a lot of pressure to keep me away from testing equipment, if any. That's where Iggy came in. He apologized for my carelessness in not bringing my betatron and some distillation apparatus. They saw the point, and got me to a laboratory. They have some nice stuff." He shook his head appreciatively.

Eagerly the colonel asked: "Anything we haven't got? Can we duplicate any of it? Where is this place? Did you see any defenses?"

"They have lots of stuff," said the doctor shortly. "Do you want me to finish? You do? All right. Well, we volatilized pieces of it, and we distilled it. We subjected it to reagents and reducers and stress analyses and crystallographic tests. We put it in magnetic fields and we tested its resistance and conductivity. We got plenty of figures on it." He laughed. Again the colonel looked impatiently at him.

"Well, what is the stuff?"

"There is no name for it, yet. Iggy wants to call it *nichevite*—in other words, 'never mind.' Leroy, it looks like dural, only it's harder and it's tougher. But it oxidizes very easily. It's metallic, but it has such a low conductivity that it makes like porcelain. It has heavy-isotope aluminum in it, and light copper, and it isn't an alloy. It's a compound. It's a blasted chemical compound, very stable, made of nothing but elements with a positive valence. It's stronger than any steel, and can withstand temperatures so high that you can forget about them. The atomic blast broke it; it didn't fuse it. We volatilized it only by powdering it and oxidizing it in an electric furnace, and then subtracting the oxygen from our calculations. That got us near enough to where we wanted to go. One thing is certain; no place on earth you ever heard about was the source of that stuff. Iggy has sworn to his bunch that the material is of extra-solar origin. They're propagandizing it in Russia now. A good thing, too. The Russians were all ready to call the whole thing a Yankee trick."

"I've heard some of those broadcasts," said the colonel. "I was hoping we could keep that information to ourselves."

"Don't be childish," said the physicist, in as abrupt a tone as he ever used. "We're not out on maneuvers, sonny. Time and time again one person or another has told the world to wake up to reality. This once the world will wake up or else. You won't be able to keep it asleep any more. It's gone too far."

The threat from Outside finally broke in the papers, but only after long and worried conferences in governmental and military headquarters all over the world. The simple fact that the world would work together or face extinction made, at first, as much impression as it ever had—very little. It was not enough to overcome man's distrust of himself. Not at first.

But the die-hards yielded, gradually and with misgivings, and acquainted the people with the menace that faced them. There was little dangerous panic—controls were too tight to allow for it—but, after the first thrill of excitement, there came a unanimous demand for a plan of action which was too powerful to ignore.

Bulletins were posted hourly on the amplitude of the Jansky signals. As Dr. Simmons had pointed out, there were three sets of them, and it became increasingly evident that the three sources were in V formation, and coming fast—much faster than the first one had.

"They'll box us," said Colonel Simmons. "There won't be any circling this time. They'll take up equidistant positions around the planet, out of our range, and they'll fire at will."

"I think you're right," said his brother. "Well, that gives us two kinds of defense. They're both puny, but it'll be the best we can do. One's technological, of course. I don't know exactly which direction would be the best to take. We can build ships ourselves, and attack them in Space. We can try to develop some kind of shield against their bombs, or whatever else they use against us. And we can work on seeking torpedoes of some sort that'll go out and get 'em—bearing in mind that we might be out there ourselves some time soon, and we don't want to fall prey to our own weapons."

"What's the other defense?"

"Sociological. In the first place, we must decentralize to a degree heretofore impossible. In the second place, we must pool our brains and our physical resources. No nation can afford to foot the bill of this kind of production; no nation can afford to take the chance of bypassing some foreign brain which might help the whole earth. Leroy! Stop puckering up like that! You look as if you're going to cry! I know what's bothering you. This looks like the end of professional militarism. Well, it is, in the national sense. But you have a bigger enemy than ever before, and one more worthy of the best efforts of humanity. You and your Board have been doing what seemed to be really large thinking. It wasn't, because its field was too small and too detailed. But now you have something worth fighting. Now your plans can be planetary—galactic—cosmic, if you like. Don't hanker after the past, soldier-boy. That attitude's about the only way there is to stay small."

"That's quite a speech," said the colonel. "I . . . wish I could argue with it. If I admit you're right, I can only admit that there is no solution at all. I don't believe the world will ever realize the necessity for co-operation until it's too late."

"Maybe it will. Maybe. I remember once talking to an old soldier who had been in the First War. In his toolshed he had a little trench shovel about eighteen inches long—a very flimsy piece of equipment it was. I remarked on it, and asked him what earthly good it was to a soldier. He laughed and said that when a green squad was deployed near no man's land and ordered to dig in, they gabbled and griped and scratched and stewed over the job. And when the first enemy bullets came whining over, they took their little shovels and they just *melted* into the ground." He chuckled. "Maybe it'll be like that. Who knows? Anyway, do what you can, Leroy."

"You have the strangest sense of humor," growled the colonel, and left.

They came.

The first was just a shape against the stars. It could be heard like a monster's breath in a dark place: *wsh-h-h-t wsh-h-h-t wsh-h-ht* on the sixty megacycle band, where, before, nothing had been heard but the meaningless hiss of the Jansky noise. But it could not be seen. Not really. It was just a—a shape. A blur. It did not reflect radar impulses very well; the response was indeterminate, but indicated that it was about the size and shape of the mysterious bomber which had dealt the first, terrifying, harmless blow.

The world went crazy, but it was a directive madness. With the appearance of the Outsider, all talk of the advisability of defense ceased. There could be no discussion of priorities.

A Curie Institute scientist announced light-metal fission. A Hungarian broke his own security regulations with the announcement of an artificial element of heretofore unthinkable density, which could be cast into fission-chambers, making possible the long-awaited pint-sized atomic engine. A Russian scientist got what seemed to be a toe hold on antigravity, and set up a yell which resulted in a conclave of big brains in Denver—men from all over the world. He was wrong, but a valuable precedent was set. A World Trade Organization was established, with control of raw materials and manufactured goods, their routes and schedules. Its control was so complete that tariffs were suspended *in toto*—the regulation read "for the duration"—and, since it is efficient to give a square deal, a square deal was given in such a clear-cut fashion that objectors were profiteers by definition. Russian ores began appearing in British smelters, and Saar coal was loaded into the Bessemers of Birmingham. Most important of all, a true International Police force came into being with hardly a labor-pain. Its members were free to go everywhere, and their duty was to stop anything which got in the way of planetary production. Individual injustice, faulty diet, poor housing, underpaying and such items fell immediately into this category, and were dealt with immediately and with great authority.

Propaganda unified itself and came to a focus in the hourly bulletins concerning the Outsiders. And every radio station on earth included that dread triple hiss in its station-breaks.

And the Outsider just stayed where it was, just lay there in the spangled black, breathing, waiting for its two cohorts.

"It's makeshift," said Dr. Simmons, "but it might do. It just might do."

The colonel stepped past him and looked at the cradle, on which rested a tubby, forty-foot object like a miniature submarine.

"A satellite, you said?"

"Uh-huh. Loaded to the gills with direction-finders and small atomic rockets. It'll keep a continuous fix on the Invaders during its transit, and relay the information to monitor stations on Earth. If one of the ships fires a torpedo, it will be detected immediately, reported, and the satellite will launch an interceptor rocket. If the bomb or torpedo dodges, the interceptor will follow it. In the meantime, big interceptors can be on their way from Earth. If a torpedo comes close to the satellite, the satellite will dodge. If it comes too close, the satellite will explode violently enough to take the torp with it. We plan to set out three layers of these things, nine in each stratum, twenty-seven in all, so spaced as to keep a constant scanning in every direction."

"Satellites, hm-m-m? Muscles, if we can do this, why can't we go right out there and get the ships themselves?"

The physicist ticked the reasons off on his fingers. "First, because if they bracket us, as in every likelihood they will, they'd be foolish to come any closer than the one that's already here, and he's out of any range which we can certainly handle just now. We can assume that his ships, if not his bombs, will be prepared against our proximity devices. We'll try, of course, but I wouldn't be too hopeful. Second, we still haven't a fuel efficient enough to allow for escape velocity maneuvers without a deadly acceleration, so our chances of sending manned rockets up for combat are nil at the moment."

The colonel looked admiringly at the satellite and the crowd of technicians which swarmed around it. "I knew we'd come up with something."

His brother gave him a quizzical glance. "I don't know if you fully realize just how big a 'we' that is you just used. The casing of that satellite is Swedish steel. The drive is a German scientist's adaptation of the Hungarian baby fission engine. The radio circuits are American, except for the scanning relay, which is Russian. And those technicians—I've never seen such a bunch. Davis, Li San, Abdallah, Schechter, O'Shaugnessy—he comes from Bolivia, by the way, and speaks only Spanish—Yokamatsu, Willet, Van Cleve. All these men, all these designs and materials, and all the money that make up these satellites, have been found and assembled from all over the earth in only the last few weeks. There were miracles of production during the Second War, Leroy, but nothing to match this."

The colonel shook his head dazedly. "I never thought I'd see it happen."

"You'll see more surprising things than this before we're done," said the scientist happily. "Now I've got to get back to work."

That was the week the second Outsider arrived. It took up a position in the celestial South, not quite opposing its fellow, and it lay quiet, breathing. If there was converse between them, it was not detectable by any known receiver. It was the same apparent size, and had the same puzzling effect on radar and photographic plates as had its predecessors.

In Pakistan, an unfueled airplane took off from a back-country airstrip, flew to twenty-thousand feet, and came in for a landing. The projector which was trained on it had no effect on the approaching aircraft in the moment it took the plane to disappear behind a hillock and reappear on the other side. There was a consequent monetary power loss, and the plane lost too much altitude and had to make another pass. The wind direction dictated a climbing turn to the north, and the beam from the projector briefly touched the antenna of an amateur radio operator called Ben Ali Ra. Ben Ali Ra's rig exploded with great enthusiasm, filling the inside of his shack with spots and specks of fused metal, ceramic, and glass. Fortunately for him—and for the world—he was in the adjoining room at the time, and suffered only a deep burn in the thigh, where it was struck by a flying fragment of a coil-form.

This was the first practical emergence of broadcast power.

Ben Ali was aware of the nature of the experiments at the nearby field, having eavesdropped by radio on some field conversations. He was also aware of certain aims and attitudes held by the local authority. Defying these, he left the area, at night, on foot, knowing that he would be killed if captured, knowing that in any event his personal property would be confiscated, and in great pain because of his wound. His story is told elsewhere; however, he reached Benares and retained consciousness long enough to warn the International Police.

The issue was not that broadcast power was a menace; it had a long way to go before it could be used without shouting its presence through every loud-speaker within miles. The thing that brought the I.P. down in force on this isolated, all but autonomous speck on the map was the charge that the inventors intended to keep their development to themselves. The attachment of the device and all related papers by the Planetary Defense Organization was a milestone of legal precedent, and brought a new definition of "eminent domain." Thereafter no delays were caused by the necessity of application to local governments for the release of defense information; the I.P. investigated, confiscated, and turned the devices in question over to the Planetary Defense Organization, acting directly, and paying fairly all parties involved. So another important step was taken toward the erasure of national lines.

Two weeks before the arrival of the third Outsider—the third of the V, excluding the one which had been shot down—the last of the twenty-seven satellites took up its orbit, and the Earth enjoyed its first easy breath since the beginning of the Attack—for so it was called.

Due to high-efficiency circuits and components, the fuel consumption of the electronic setup in the satellites was very small. They held their orbits without power, except for an occasional automatic correction-kick. They could operate without servicing for years. It was assumed that by the time they needed servicing, astrogation would have developed to the point where they could be refueled—and recharged—by man-carrying ships. If technology did not solve that problem, little harm could be done by the silent, circling machines; when, at long last, they slipped from their arbitrary orbits and spiraled in to crash, so many years would have passed that the question was, momently, academic.

And even before the twenty-seventh satellite was launched, factories were retooling for a long dreamt-of project—a Space Station, which would circle the Earth in an orbit close enough to be reached by man-carrying rockets, which would rest and refuel there and take off again for deep Space, without the crushing drag of Earth's gravity.

The third Outsider took up its position, as Dr. Simmons had prophesied, equidistant from the others with the Earth in the center, rolling nakedly under them. As in the case of the arrivals of the other two, there was no sign of its presence but the increasing sound on the sixty megacycle band. Radar failed utterly to locate it until, suddenly, it was in its position—a third blur against the distant stars, a third indeterminate, fifteen-hundred-foot shape on the radarscopes.

The Board of Strategy was happily, almost gleefully, busy again. Their earlier work within the field of the probability of human works, faded to insignificance against the probabilities inherent in the Attack. There was another major difference, too; they came out in the open. They plastered the world with warnings, cautions, and notices, many of them with no more backing than the vivid imaginings of some early science fiction writer—plus probability. Although logic indicated that the first blows would be in the form of self-guided missiles, thousands of other possibilities were considered. Spy rays, for example; radio hams the world over were asked to keep winding coils, keep searching the spectrum for any unusual frequencies. Telepathic amplifiers, for another example; asylums were circularized for any radical changes in the quality and quantity of insanity and even abnormal conduct. The literary critics were called in to watch for any trends in creative writing which seemed to have any inhuman content. Music was watched the same way, as were the graphic arts. Farmers and fire wardens were urgently counseled to watch for any plant life, particularly predatory or prehensile or drug-bearing plant life, which may develop. Sociologists were dragged from their almost drunken surveys of this remarkable turn of social evolution, and were ordered right back into it again, trying to extrapolate something harmful to come from this functional, logical, unified planet. Only the nationalists found harm, and they were—well, unfashionable.

The bombs came about a month after the third Outsider took up his post.

The whole world watched. Everything stopped. Every television screen pictured radarscopes, and the whip-voiced announcer at Planetary Defense Central in Geneva, which had at long last regained its place as a world center.

The images showed Outsiders A, B, and C in rapid succession. So well synchronized was the action that the three images could have been superimposed, and would have seemed like one picture. Each ship launched two bombs; of each two, one turned lazily toward Earth, and the other hovered.

"Out of range of the satellites," said the announcer. "We shall have to wait. The satellites will detect the bombs when they are within two hundred miles, and will then launch their interceptors. Our Earth-based rockets are aiming now."

There was a forty-minute wait. Neighbor called neighbor; illuminated news-banners on the sides of buildings gave the dreaded news. Buses and trains stopped while their passengers and crews flocked to televisors. There was a hushed tension, world-wide.

"Flash! Satellite 24 has released an interceptor. Stand by; perhaps we can get a recording of the scanner . . . one moment please . . . *Anything from Monitor 24b yet, Jim? On the air now? Check* . . . Ladies and gentlemen, if you can be patient a moment; we are recording pictures of the radarscope at Monitor 24b in Lhasa. It will be only a few . . . here it is now."

Flickering at first, then clearing, came the Lhasa picture. The monitor station there kept a fix on Satellite 24 from horizon to horizon, as did the satellite's other two stations in San Francisco and Madrid. The picture showed the familiar lines of the satellite. Abruptly a short, thick tube began to protrude from the hull. When extended about eight feet, it swung over about forty degrees on its ball-and-socket base. From its tip shot a small cylinder; there was a brief flicker of jets. "The interceptor," said the loud-speakers unnecessarily.

The scene flashed to the Earth-based interceptor station at White Sands. A huge rocket mounted with deceptive slowness, balanced on a towering column of flame, and disappeared into the sky.

Then, bewilderingly, the scene was repeated for Monitor Stations 22c and 25a, as their satellites sensed the bombs coming from Outsiders B and C. White Sands sent two more giant rockets up as fast as they could set the seeking gear.

Then, after an interminable four hours, came the picture which was to stand, forever, as the high-point in newsreel coverage. It was the image picked up from the relaying television camera in the nose of Satellite 24's little interceptor.

It fixed the image of the Outsider's bomb, and it would not let go. The bomb, at first only a speck, increased in size alarmingly. It was a perfect cylinder, seen in perspective. There was nothing streamlined about it. It was quite featureless except for a strange indistinction around one end, as if it were not in focus. It was like a small patch of the substance of the Outsiders themselves.

The image grew. It filled the screen—

And then there was nothing.

But cameras all over Europe picked up and relayed the image of that awe-inspiring explosion. Silently a ball of light appeared in the sky, expanding, flickering through the entire spectrum, sending out a wheel of blue and silver rays. It lasted for a full fifteen seconds, growing in size and in brilliance, before it began to fade, and it left a pastel ghost of itself for a minute afterward. Speckles of random radiation cluttered the screens then, and there were no more actual pictures of the action.

The entire earth gave a concerted shout of joy. In dozens of languages and dialects, the fierce, triumphant sound roared skyward. *Got one!* And the bells and the whistles picked up the cry, frightening sleeping birds, sending crocodiles scuttling off river banks, waking children over the world. It was like a thousand New Year's Eves, simultaneously.

What happened next, happened quickly.

A White Sands rocket got the second bomb. For some reason there was no atomic explosion. Perhaps the proximity gear failed. Perhaps it was neutralized, though that would seem impossible, since the seeking gear obviously did not fail. It was not as spectacular as the first interception, but it was quite as effective. The purely physical impact as the huge interceptor struck the tiny bomb all but pulverized them both.

The third bomb breezed past its satellite interceptor, its White Sands interceptor, and a second-stratum satellite. It was observed that on getting within range of the seeking-radar of each of these, it became enveloped in the misty, coruscating field which characterized the Outsider ships. Apparently this field completely confused the radar; it was as if the radar detected it but didn't know what to do with it—"same spot we were in a year ago," as Dr. Simmons remarked tersely.

The bomb entered the atmosphere—

And burned up like a meteor.

Then it was that the most incredible thing of all happened.

The three hovering bombs—one by each Outsider—slowly retreated toward the parent vessel, as if being reeled in.

They recalled their bombs.

Thereafter they lay quietly, the three Outsiders. They did not move, they made no move. They gasped their triple pantings, and they filled thousands of photographic plates with their indeterminate muzziness, and that was all.

Four giant rockets out of five, which were sent after the invaders, missed their mark completely. The fifth, which was equipped with an ingenious seeking device based on correlation of its target with an actual photographic transparency of the target, apparently struck Outsider B. There was a splendid atomic display, and again the world went mad with joy.

But when the area could be observed again, Outsider B was still there. And there it stayed. There they all stayed.

A cyclic, stiffly controlled panic afflicted the Earth, as a sense of impending doom was covered by humanity's classic inability to fix its attention for very long to any one thing; alternated to reactive terror, swung away from terror again because life must go on, because you must eat and he must love and they must make a bet on the World Series. . . .

Seven months passed.

Dr. Simmons plodded into his private office and shut the door. He was tired—much more tired than in the days, earlier that year, when he was working an eighteen-hour day. *The more a man does, the more he can do,* he reflected wearily, *until the optimum is reached; and the optimum is way up yonder, if he cares about what he's doing.* He sat down at his desk and leaned back. *And if he cares just as much as ever, but there just isn't as much to do, he gets tired. He gets very, very tired . . .*

He palmed his face, blinked his eyes, sighed and, leaning forward, flipped the annunciator switch. His night secretary said brightly: "Yes, doctor?"

"Don't let anything or anybody in here for two hours. And take care of that cold."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, doctor; I will."

A good kid. . . . He rose and went to the washroom which adjoined his office. Stepping into the shower stall, he lifted up the soap dish, which had a concealed hinge, and pressed a stud under it. He counted off four seconds, released the stud, and pulled on the hot water faucet. The back wall of the shower swung toward him. He stepped through into his own private laboratory—the one where no one else ever went.

He kicked the door closed behind him and looked around. *I almost wish I could do it all over again. The things that have happened here, the dreams . . .*

His thought cut out in a sudden, numbing shock.

"What are you doing here?"

The intruder accepted the question, turned it over, altered it and gave it back. "What have *you* been doing here?" rasped the colonel.

The physicist sank into an easy-chair and gaped at his brother. His pulse was pounding, and for a moment his cheek twitched. "Just give me a second," he said wryly. "This is a little like finding someone in your bed." He took out a handkerchief and touched his dry lips with it. "How did you get in here?"

Leroy Simmons was sitting behind a worktable. He had his hat, with its polished visor, in the crook of his arm, and his buttons were brilliant. He looked as if he were sitting for a particular kind of portrait. The doctor jumped up. "You've *got* to have a drink!" he said emphatically.

The colonel put his hat on the table and leaned forward. The act wrinkled his tunic and showed up his bald spot. "What's the matter with you, Muscles?"

The doctor shook his head. *He doesn't look like a man of distinction any more,* he thought regretfully. "I feel a little better now," he said. "What brings you here, Leroy?"

"I've been watching you for months," said the colonel. "I've had to do it all myself. This is . . . it's too big." He looked completely miserable. "I followed you and watched you and checked up on you. I took measurements all around these offices, and located this room. I was in here a dozen times, looking for the gimmick on the door."

"Oh, yes. Always dropping around to see me when I wasn't around, and saying you'd wait. My secretary told me."

"Her!" The syllable was eloquent. "She's no help. I never saw anyone harder to get information from."

"It's an unbeatable combination in a secretary," he grinned. "Infinite tact, and no facts. She's not in it, Leroy. No one is."

"No one but you. I notice you're not denying anything."

The doctor sighed. "You haven't charged me with anything yet. Suppose you tell me what you know, or what you think you know."

The colonel took a somber-backed little notebook out of his pocket. "I have no associates," he said grimly, "either. It's all in here. Some of it is Greek to me, but some I understand—worse luck. I wish I didn't. You have something to do with the Outsider, don't you?"

His brother looked at him for a long moment, and then nodded, as if he had asked and answered a question.

"Yes."

"You know where they come from, what they're going to do, how they operate—everything about them?"

"That's right."

"They have given you—information. They have given you a way to"—he referred to the book, his lips moving as he read; they always had—"expand and concentrate binding energy into a self-sustaining field."

"No."

"No? You have all the formulas. You wrote thousands of pages of notes on the subject. Your diary mentions it repeatedly—and as if it was an accomplished fact."

"It is. I didn't get it from the Outsiders. They got it from me."

There was a jolting silence. The colonel turned quite white. "That . . . does . . . it," he whispered. "I knew you were in contact with the enemy, Muscles. I tried my best to believe that you were simply working them for information, so that we could use it against them. A risky game, and you were playing it alone. After I went through your papers here, I just couldn't believe it any more. You seemed to be working along with them. And now you tell me that you actually are supplying them with devices we haven't got!"

The scientist nodded gravely.

The colonel's hand, under the table, moved to his wrist. He touched a button on the small transmitter there, and pulled a slide over.

Dr. Simmons said, thickly: "Leroy. Would you mind telling me how you got on to this?"

"I'll tell you, all right. It started with a routine checkup of supplies and equipment into these laboratories, for auditing purposes. No production is run without cost accounting, even by the government. Even by a Planetary one. It was brought to my attention that certain things came in here that apparently never went out. When I went over the reports and saw they were correct, I wrote a memo which cleared you completely, on my authority, and I killed the investigation. I—picked it up myself."

"Good heavens, why?"

"If I found anything," the colonel said with difficulty, "I wanted to take care of it myself."

"Sort of keep the family name sweet and clean?"

"Not that. You're too clever. You always were. I . . . I'll tell you something. I was appointed to the Board because of you. I never could have made it otherwise. The Board figured I'd be an intimate link with you; that I could see you any time, when no one else could."

Of course I knew that, thought the doctor. "I didn't know that," he said. "I don't believe you."

"Oh, cut it out," said the colonel. "You played me for a sucker all along, and through me, the Board."

Correct again, the physicist thought. He said: "Nonsense, Leroy. I just withheld information from time to time."

"You gave us tips," said the colonel bitterly. "You sent us off on goose chase after goose chase. And we pushed the whole world around the way you wanted us to."

The boy's real sharp tonight, thought Dr. Simmons, and added to himself, *He's such a swell, sincere character. I hate to see him go through all this.* "And why does all this make you squelch the Board's investigation and pick it up yourself?"

"I know how slick you are," said the colonel doggedly. "You just might talk a jury or a court-martial out of shooting you. I don't see how you could, but I don't see how you could have done any of this either." He waved a hand around the secret lab. "You won't talk your way out of it with me."

"You're my judge, then, my jury. My executioner, too?"

"I'm . . . your brother," said the colonel in a low voice, "and, like always, I want you to get what you deserve."

"I could puddle up and bawl like a baby," said Dr. Simmons suddenly, warmly. "Let's stop playing around, Leroy, and I'll tell you the whole story."

"Is it true you've been working with the Outsider?"

"Yes, you idiot!"

The colonel slumped back and said, glumly: "Then that settles it. Go ahead and talk if you want to. It can't make any difference now." He looked at his watch.

The scientist rose and went to a wall panel, which he pulled out, revealing a compact tape recording outfit. From a rack above it he selected a reel, set it on the peg, and drew the end of the tape into the self-threader. Without switching on, he returned to his chair.

"Just a couple of preliminaries, Leroy, and then you can have the whole story. I have done what I have done because of what you used to call my 'dewy-eyed idealism.' It has worked. We live now in a unified world. It must remain unified until the threat of the Outsider is done with; it has no alternative. I don't think that the Outsider will be removed for a while yet, and the longer the world lives this way, the harder it will be for it to go back to the old cut-up, mixed-up way of life it has followed for the last fifteen thousand years or so.

"I'll tell you what will happen from now on out. The Space Station will be completed and put into action. A new fuel will be developed which will speed things just at the boredom point. Shortly afterward, the three Outsiders will put out their hovering bombs again. It'll throw the world into a panic, but with the Station and the new fuel and the whole world working at it, a fighting ship will leave the Station—outbound.

"It will sling some torps at the Outsiders, and they won't go off, or they'll miss, or they'll explode prematurely. The Outsider won't hit back. The warship will move in close, and when it gets close enough to do real damage, it will get a mesage.

"This message will be broadcast on the three most likely frequencies, and signals will go out all over the other bands advertising those three frequencies. The message will start like this: 'Stop and listen. This is the Outsider.' This will be repeated in English, French, Spanish, German, Arabic and, for good measure, Esperanto. This is the message."

He rose again, put his hand on the switch, smiled, and turned to face the colonel. "Funny . . . this was designed only to speak to the future. And you're the first to hear it."

"Why is that funny?"

"You're the past." He flipped the switch. "You'll pardon the tone of it," he said gently. "I had a chance to make a deep purple oration, and I find I ramble on like an old lady over her knitting."

"You?"

"Me. The Outsider. Listen."

This is the message, as it came from the tape in Dr. Simmons' leisurely mellow voice:

I am the Outsider. Do not fear me. There will be no battle. I am your friend. Hear me out.

I am four ships and a noise in the Jansky radiations. The ships are not ships, and they came from Earth, not from Outside. The Jansky signals do not come from the stars. Listen.

I am one man, one man only, without helpers, without any collaborators, except possibly thinkers—a little Thoreau, a little Henry George, maybe a smattering of H. G. Wells . . . you can believe me. Archimedes once said, "Give me a lever long enough, and a place for a fulcrum, and I shall move the earth!" Given the tools, one man can do *anything*. There's plenty of precedent for this. Aside from the things which produce a man, aside from the multitude of factors which make his environment, if the man is capable, and if the environment provides tools and a time ripe for action, that man can use his tools to their utmost extent. Hitler did it. John D. Rockefeller and Jay Gould did it. Kathleen Winsor did it. I read somewhere, long ago, a beautiful allegory. "Take a naked human being, and set him down beside the Empire State building, and ask, what have these two things in common?" Given the tools, mankind can do *anything*.

I was given the greatest single tool in history. I stumbled on it. I'll tell you the truth: I worked like a hound dog to find it, once I suspected that it was there.

It's a theory and a device. The theory has to do with binding energy; the device releases and controls it. It is all completely and clearly explained elsewhere; I'll come to that in time. Roughly speaking, however, it is a controlled diffusion of matter. Any gas can be rarefied and diffused. So, I have discovered, can any matter. Further, it can be diffused analytically. Binding energy is actually a component of matter. If a close-orbit situation can be induced between the electrons and the nucleus of an atom, its binding energy can be withdrawn, if equally diffused, to form a field around the atom. The field is toroidal, and has peculiar qualities.

For one thing, it does crazy things to the apparent center of gravity of the mechanism producing the field. Any seeking device which tends to locate mass, directs itself at the c.g. But on approaching a field of this sort, the closer it gets, the harder it becomes for it to find the c.g., since the apparent center of mass is out at the edges. When directed at the actual center of the device, your seeker veers violently to the edge—hard enough, generally, to make it pass the mechanism altogether.

The field distorts and reflects radio and light waves in an extremely complex fashion. These waves are led powerfully to follow the outlines of the toroid; but since the field is a closed one—closed as tightly as only binding energy can close anything—light and radio cannot penetrate, no matter how strong the temptation. And so they are thrown back, rather than reflected in reflection's ordinary sense, and return to their detectors—receivers, photographic plates, or what have you—in a rather distorted pattern.

The field has also a strange effect on valence, making it possible to build chemical compounds out of elements of similar valence. The atomic situation within the toroid—in the hole of the doughnut, as it were—is weird, and is the place where such compounding can be done. Exact data on this will also be given you.

Now, here is exactly what was done. Having found the way to generate this field, I debated the wisdom of giving it to a world on the verge of war. I contemplated destroying all my evidence, but could not; the thing was too big; humanity needed it too much. But it was too big for even a unified humanity on one planet. It's big enough for all of space, and needs a humanity big enough to control it. I felt that if humanity were big enough to unify, it would be big enough for this device. It is, now, or you spacemen would not be listening to me.

After having developed the binding-energy field, I invented another device—the Spy-Eye. I knew that the little eavesdroppers would be produced by the thousands, so that a few would not be missed. A half-dozen were launched with their selector circuits altered, and some of their equipment replaced. Their fueling was different, too; there is a reaction-formula using the b.e. field which will be found with the rest of these things.

My half-dozen Spy-Eyes, powered vastly beyond any of their little brothers and sisters, went Outside and took up their positions in space.

They are the Outsiders!

The noise in the Jansky radiation was pure propaganda, and its execution was simple—practically primitive. It was a trick once used by illegal radio stations during one of the Wars—I forget which. Three of them, widely separated and synchronized, sent out the same signal, beamed to an Earth diameter. Direction-finders on Earth obediently pointed out their *resultant*—a direction in which they did not exist!

The Spy-Eyes themselves were too small and too far away to be detectable, unless one knew exactly what to look for and where to look. The amplitude of the signals was raised gradually until it reached a preselected volume. Then one of the Spy-Eyes set up a b.e. field and dropped toward Earth. It looked strange and huge. It came in close and circled Earth twice at a high velocity. I think I had more trouble there than at any other point; but I managed, finally, to wangle the Board of Strategy into firing on it. Their shell hit nothing; the b.e. field disrupted its atomic warhead, for in the presence of a hard-radiation source, the field increases the effective critical mass. The Spy-Eye itself is what fell on Japan; it was armed, of course, and was mistaken for a little bomb. What made the explosion so intense was the fact that the field held the disrupting matter together for a fraction of a millisecond longer than it had ever been done before. The object which fell near Minsk was a piece of stage-property I had made earlier. It, too, had a b.e. field generator on its back. Again it exhibited its exclusiveness and its penetrating power; it acted like a thing of great mass when it hit the ground. The generator was, of course, blown to dust on impact, leaving only the supposed specimen.

The other three Outsider ships were Spy-Eyes, b.e. field equipped. The bombs were real bombs, however. They were supplied by Satellite 18, which, if examined, will be found inexplicably empty of its interceptors. I put guiding heads on them, and sent one to each of my "Outsider" Spy-Eyes.

I think that explains everything. If you question my motives, regard the Earth as you deep-spacemen see it today—unified, powerful, secure within and without. Humanity is ready, now, to take the first steps toward greatness. Therefore:

Send my name—Simmons—in the old International Morse code on 28.275 meters, from a distance of ten statute miles from any of the three Invader ships, at one thousand watts power. Repeat the name four times. The field will break down; you may then locate the Spy-Eyes and pull them in. Dismantle them; inside you will find this recording and certain papers, which contain everything I know about the binding-energy field. Use it well.

Colonel Simmons leaned back in his chair. His face was gray. "Muscles—is this all true?"

"You know it is. You've seen it in action."

"Now what have I done?" muttered the colonel.

"Jumped to conclusions," said the doctor easily.

The colonel's mouth opened and closed spasmodically. Then in violent reaction, he swore. "You couldn't've done it!" he roared. "You set the timetable for this whole thing and built it into those Spy-Eyes. Well, what about all that was done here—the interceptors from White Sands, and the development of the satellites, and all that?"

"Leroy, old horse, take it easy, will you? Who had charge of all that development? Who had the final say on design? Who outlined the exact use of each piece of equipment—by way, of course, of using it to its greatest efficiency?"

"You did. You did." The colonel covered his face. "All that power. All that control. You could have had the whole world for the taking, if you'd wanted it. Instead—"

"Instead, everyone on earth has a job, enough food, good quarters, and an equal chance at education. I have it on good authority that the next session of Congress will unify divorce laws and traffic laws in this country. Russia has not only a second party, but a third one. Social legislation is beginning to follow the lines of the Postal Union, and already a movement has started to have the Governments pay the people their full wages during a six-week vacation. No Communism, no Fascism; function is the law, and social security—lower case—is function."

"Shut up!" mouthed the colonel in a peculiar tone, half moan, half roar. He held his head and he rocked.

The doctor clasped his shoulder and laughed. "Listen to me, Leroy," he said, "and I'll tell you something funny. You know how little, stupid anecdotes will stick with you, like the limerick about the young lady from Wheeling, and the time you took the ball of tar to bed with you and we had to shave your head? Well, believe it or not, I honestly think that this job I have just done had its source in a couple —no; three—things that happened to me when I was young. When I think of them, and look at the world today—my!"

He took a turn around the floor. His brother sat still.

"Wells had something to do with it. Wells pointed out, mostly indirectly, that only a miracle could make humans work together. And sometimes his miracle was entertaining but untenable, because it constituted a common aim for mankind. That never did work. World peace is the finest aim a race could have, but it never tempted us much. Wells' other miracle was a common enemy—the Martian invasion, for example. Now, that makes sense. It did then and it does now.

"And here are the silly little things that have stuck with me. Remember that summer when I got a job as a dirt-moving foreman on a canal job? Two of the muckers got into a fight out by one of the machines. I got up into the dragline and dumped a load of sand on the two of them. They stopped fighting, ganged up on me, and punched the daylights out of me." He laughed.

"Then there was the other one. It was even sillier. It was in a restaurant, right after I started to teach at Drexel Tech. There were two bubble-headed little chicks sitting at a nearby table, verbally clawing each other's eyes out over a young man. Just as I was about to get up and move back out of the combat area, they spotted the young man in question submitting to the wiles of a very cute redhead. Whereupon the combatants were suddenly allies, and on the spot"—he laughed again—"concocted a devilish scheme to squirt ink on the contents of the redhead's clothesline!"

The colonel was looking at him dully.

"The common denominator," continued the doctor, "in the analysis of Wells, the fight on the canal job, and the feline fiddle-faddle in the café, was surprisingly valid, considering the wide difference in the nature of the fields of combat. It boils down to this: that human conflicts cease to be of importance in the face of a common enemy. 'Divide and rule' has its obverse; 'unite and conquer.' That's what the world has done during the Attack; except that instead of conquering the Outsider, it has conquered itself—still its common enemy."

"Wells," murmured the colonel. "I remember that. I was reading him and told you the miracle idea. I was in military prep., and you were a freshman in college."

"Gosh yes," said the doctor. "I remember, Leroy."

The colonel seemed to be thinking hard, and slowly. He spoke slowly. "Muscles," he said, "remember how I wore your freshman dinky when you came home for a week end?"

"Do I!" chuckled the doctor. "You wouldn't give it back, and I spent the next six weeks sweeping out seniors' rooms because I showed up at school without it. Heh! Remember me strutting around in your gray cape when you were at the Point?"

"Yeh. We were always doing that. Your tie, my tie, our tie. Those were the days. You wouldn't fit my clothes now, Fatso."

"Is *that* so!" laughed the doctor, delighted to see his brother making some effort to come up out of his doldrum. "Listen, son; you rate too much to be in shape. Too many flunkies to bend over for you when you want your shoes tied."

The colonel whipped off the coat with all those shiny buttons. "You couldn't button that around your fallen chest."

In answer the grinning doctor shucked out of his laboratory smock and put his arms into the uniform jacket. With some difficulty and a certain amount of sucking in and holding back, he got it buttoned. "The hat," he demanded. He put it on. It was too small.

Meanwhile the colonel slipped into the smock, with its solder-flux stains and its worn elbows. He flapped it in front of him. "What do you do with all this yardage? Smuggle stuff? Hey, Muscles; let's have a look in the cheval glass in the office. I want to see what I would look like as a Great Brain."

They went into the office, through the door in the shower stall. The doctor, all aglitter in his brother's jacket, went first. There was a man standing just by the outside door. He had a black cloth over his nose and mouth and a silenced automatic in his hand.

The colonel, his smock flapping, pushed past his brother and walked out into the room. The man shot him twice and disappeared through the door.

"Leroy! Who did it, kid?"

"I did," said the colonel. *"No!* No doctor. Too late. Stay—"

"You . . . oh. *Oh!* That bullet was meant for me. The jacket switch, hm-m-m? But why? Who was it?"

"Never mind . . . him," said the colonel. "Hired. Psychoed. Whole thing planned. Foolproof escape. All witnesses called away. He doesn't know you. Or me. My idea. Was very . . . careful."

"Why? Why?"

"Found out you . . . work with . . . enemy—" His voice trailed off. He closed his eyes sleepily and lay still for a moment. Then, his face twisted with effort, he sat suddenly upright. His voice returned—his normal, heavy, crackling tone. "I had proof—proof enough that you were a traitor, Muscles. I was afraid you'd get clear if you got a chance to work on a court. But I couldn't bring myself to kill you with my own hands. I figured it out this way."

"So he'd be there, and shoot me when we came out of the office. But why didn't you call him off?"

"Couldn't. He had orders to shoot the civilian. You were an officer for the moment. He didn't know us, I tell you. I radioed to a third party, who knows nothing. He gave this hood the starting gun." He raised his left hand. On the wrist was the miniature transmitter. "I called him when you admitted you worked with the Outsider . . . then you explained . . . and I couldn't call back; he was on his way here."

"Leroy, you fool. Why didn't you let him go ahead? Why did you make that silly switch? My work's done. Nothing can change it now!"

"Muscles . . . I'm . . . old-line Army. Can't help it . . . don't like this . . . brave new . . . never could. You're fit for it. You made it; you live in it. Besides, you'll . . . appreciate the joke better than . . . I would"

"What do you mean, kid?"

"You underestimated . . . you thought you'd be dead when the . . . spacemen heard your recording." He laughed weakly. "You won't be, you know. Things're moving too fast."

There was a sudden, horrible spell of coughing.

And then Dr. Simmons was alone, holding his dead brother's head in his arms, rocking back and forth, buffeted and drowning in an acid flood of grief.

And behind it—far, far behind it, his articulate mind said, dazedly:

Great day in the morning, he's right! What'll they make of me—a saint, or a blood-red Satan?

Divided no longer, Mankind consolidated its gains and looked to the stars. From the initial moon trip in 1978, space travel rapidly extended to the planets. With Mars and Venus colonized, the twenty-first century's economy had an interplanetary basis, influenced by the powerful spacemen's union. By 2145 the union had destroyed the corporations and had instituted, after a bitter fight, a dictatorial rule.

BREAKDOWN

by Jack Williamson

OFFICIALLY, Boss Kellon was merely executive secretary of the Union of Spacemen, Managers & Engineers. But *boss,* now in 2145, was equivalent to *caesar.* From the unitron convertors on Mercury to the lonely mining outposts scattered across the Jovian moons, the Union dominated mankind.

And Harvey Kellon was the Union.

He was a big man. His shrewd, deep-set, deliberate eyes could be chill as blue Callistonian fire diamonds, but a bland professional smile warmed his cragged red face. He wore a flowing white toupee, and few of Sunport's millions suspected that the boss was bald as the first caesar of old Rome.

Sunport was his capital. For a hundred years the monopoly of interplanetary commerce had fed its power, until even New York was now only a quaint provincial suburb. The towers of the megalopolis stood like a forest of bright monoliths for a hundred miles about the high Colorado mesa that had become the port of space. Forever the tiny moonlet of the Outstation rode at the city's meridian, a man-made star of its fortune.

Boss Kellon lived in the crown of the lofty Union Tower. The huge, luxurious halls of his penthouse suite were named for the worlds of the Sun. Tonight there was a ball in the Neptune Room, and he was dancing with Selene du Mars.

The boss was short of breath, and dark perspiration spotted the shoulders of his purple dress pajamas. His feet ached. Perhaps, at sixty, he was too old to be dancing; certainly he had too much weight about the middle. But Selene du Mars could make men seek to banish such uncomfortable thoughts.

She was tall and supple and green-eyed. She had been a famous teleview dancer. He thought she was the most costly and glittering thing in all Sunport. Tonight her hair was platinum, and she was dazzling with fire diamonds. He thought those favorite stones were like herself—cold and bright and hard. But he could admire even her calculating ambition, because it was so akin to his own.

Selene claimed a hereditary degree in militechnic engineering. Once Kellon had ordered a quiet investigation, and the Goon Department reported evidence of forgery. Her father had been merely the servant of a militechnic officer, on Jupiter Station. But Kellon suppressed the report, with not a word to Selene. He knew how hard was the climb up from the gray.

Now, and not for the first time, she was wheedling him to crown himself. Her voice was cool and perfect as her long body, and she used the flattering address that she herself had first suggested:

"Your genius, can we have the coronation soon? Everything is planned. Your historian friend Melkart has dug out the old ceremonials for me. My jewelers are working on a fire-diamond crown."

"For me to pay for," Kellon chuckled, and drew her pantherine body close against him. "Darling, I know you want to be Empress of the Sun, but your pretty head is in danger enough, without a coronet."

Kellon frowned, sobered by the thought. He had climbed to the perilous apex of a human pyramid. He was first of the million hereditary engineers, who, with their families and the various grades of their retainers, occupied nearly all the upper-level towers of Sunport.

But, here in Sunport alone, nearly eighty million more wore the gray of labor. They dwelt and toiled in the subsurface levels, and the Goon Department bound their lives with iron restrictions. Kellon knew how they lived—because he had been one of them.

Most of them hated the technician nobility of the Union. That was the dangerous flaw in the pyramid. Kellon had once tried to mend it, with reforms and concessions. But Melkart warned that he was three generations too late. Yielding to that hatred, he was merely paying out the rope to hang himself.

"We're dancing on a volcano, darling," he told Selene. "Better not poke the fire!"

Selene's bare shoulders tossed, and her eyes flashed dark as her emerald-sequined gown. But she curbed her displeasure. She knew that a hundred other women in the long, green-lit hall would have murdered gladly for her place in Kellon's arms. Her frown turned to a pretty pout.

"Please, your genius." Her perfect face winced slightly. Kellon knew that he had stepped on her silver slipper. But she smiled again, shrugging off his apology. "It wasn't caution that conquered the planets for you," she chided. "Your genius isn't getting old?"

That was his vulnerable point, and Selene knew it. Perhaps he was. The details of administration were increasingly burdensome. It was hard to find trustworthy subordinates. Sometimes he felt that the Union itself was slipping into decadence, as he grew older.

"The coronation—" her coaxing voice went on.

But Kellon stopped listening. He let her dance out of his arms. He watched the thin man threading toward him through the press of bright-clad engineering aristocracy wheeling about the dance floor.

The thin man was Chief Marquard of the Goon Department. He wore wine-colored formal pajamas and a jeweled Union star. But he had no partner, and his harassed expression meant bad news. Kellon braced himself for trouble.

"Your genius, it's the Preacher!" The whisper was hoarse with strain. "He's here in Sunport." Marquard gulped and wet his lips. "Still in hiding—somewhere down in the drainage levels."

This was more than merely trouble. Kellon swayed. The lofty shining murals blurred. He saw instead the dark, dripping tunnels, a thousand feet beneath the pavements of Sunport. Once he had hidden there himself, a hunted man in gray. The syncopated drone of the orchestra was suddenly the throb of drainage pumps.

Kellon's thick, pink hands made a desperate clutching gesture. He had watched the spread of the Gray Crusade, a poison that attacked the Union and rotted the very fabric of civilization. For years the Goon Department had sought the Preacher, in vain. But it was hard to believe that the fanatic had dared to enter Sunport.

He was getting old, indeed. Old and alone. He felt helpless against the demands of this grim moment. Suddenly he was almost ill with a desperate regret for the quarrel with his son. Family loyalty, in this cynical metropolis, was almost the only dependable bond. Now he needed Roy, terribly.

Dazed by the impact of this emergency, his mind slipped back into the past. To Roy, and Roy's mother. It had been Melkart who first introduced the slender, gray-eyed girl. They were at a secret meeting, down in the drainage ways. Melkart said proudly, "Ruth is going to be the Joan d'Arc of the New Commonwealth."

Perhaps Ruth had loved Melkart. Kellon was never sure. For the secret police of the Corporation raided the party headquarters, a few months later. Melkart was captured and transported to Mars. It was only after she had received a false report of Melkart's death, that she would marry Kellon.

Kellon was responsible for that report. He had tried to atone for it, however, with the parole he secured for Melkart as soon as he had sufficient influence.

Ruth had never abandoned her dream of the New Commonwealth. She had not approved the methods of Kellon's rise to power, and she was deeply hurt when he ordered the Union Goons to hunt down the few surviving members of the party. Roy was twelve years old when she died.

Roy was like his mother—lean, intense, idealistic. Kellon was delighted when the boy wanted to take practical degrees in unitronic engineering—it helped him forget that his own hereditary titles were forgeries.

But Roy had been a bitter disappointment. He failed to show any interest in Union politics. He refused to enter the Militechnic College, to prepare for command and promotion in the Fleet. Instead, at twenty, he had gone to waste a year with some meaningless research at the solar power plants on Mercury.

The quarrel happened after Roy returned—five years ago. Roy didn't like Selene du Mars. She made matters worse by trying to flirt with him. He called her an unpleasant name, and stalked out of the penthouse suite. He had never come back.

But Kellon had followed him, next day, to the great unitronics laboratory on the mesa. A silent crystal egg, his unitron glider sloped down toward the long, low, white-roofed building that stood between the commercial port and the militechnic reservation.

Like an elongated silver bubble, a freighter was lifting from the Venus Docks, bright and strange in the shimmer of its drive field. Gray stevedores were trucking away the gleaming metal ingots and squared hardwood logs it had unloaded. A Martian liner lay in her cradle, spilling dark ore concentrate down a chute. A space-battered Jovian relief ship was loading mountains of crates and bales and drums—food and equipment and power for the miners on Callisto. The Mercury Docks were stacked with crated dynode batteries, freshly charged in the Sun plants. All the commerce of an interplanetary empire!

But Kellon's pride had a bitter taste. He could remember when the port was far busier, back in the days of the Corporation. Now half the yards were weed grown and abandoned. Dismantled ships were turning red with rust in the cradles at the disused Saturn Docks.

His pilot landed the glider on the white roof. Kellon asked for his son, and a startled watchman guided him down through the laboratory. Space had really been conquered in this building, Kellon knew; all the great advances in unitronic flight had been made here. But most of the halls were deserted now, the old equipment dismantled or ruined.

Kellon found Roy in a long, clean shop whose plastic walls were softly radiant with a clear blue-white. Huge windows looked out across the militechnic reservation, where the unitron cruisers of the Fleet lay like immense dead-black arrows.

Roy was bronzed with spaceburn from his year on Mercury. He looked up, with his mother's nervous quickness, from some gadget on a bench. Kellon was a little shocked to see the screwdriver in his hands —for an engineer of the higher ranks, any sort of manual work was considered degrading.

Roy seemed glad to see him.

"Sorry I lost my temper." He smiled—his mother's intense, grave smile. "I don't like Selene. But she isn't important." His brown, quick fingers touched the gadget, and his gray eyes lit with eagerness. "I'm searching for a way to test the condensation hypothesis."

"Look, son." Kellon gestured impatiently at the window, toward the row of mighty black cruisers. "You don't have to play with abstractions. There's the Fleet, waiting for you to take command as soon as you are qualified. Your experiments should be left to underlings."

"I'm sorry, boss." Roy's tanned face set with his mother's unbreakable spirit. "I think my hypothesis is more important than the Fleet."

"Hypothesis?" Anger boomed in Kellon's voice. "Important." He tried to calm his tone. "Can you explain what is important about it?"

"I tried to, before I went to Mercury," Roy said. "You were too busy to listen. You see, I have a new idea about how the planets were formed. I went to Mercury to check it, with closer observations of the Sun. I believe I am right."

Kellon attempted to swallow his impatience.

"I'm listening, now," he said.

"You see, the origin of solar systems has never been well explained," Roy began in a careful voice. "The tidal theories of the twentieth century were all somewhat strained. There was a statistical difficulty. Only one star in a hundred thousand could possibly pass near enough to another to raise planet-forming tides. But the astronomers of the Outstation long ago convinced themselves that planetary systems are a lot more frequent than that.

"The discovery of the unitron, a hundred years ago, caused a revolution in nearly every science. It was recognized as the ultimate matter-energy unit of the universe. For the first time, it fitted all the various phenomena of electromagnetics and gravitation into a single picture. But most engineers, in the era of the Corporation, were too busy conquering and exploring the planets to devote much time to abstract theories."

Kellon felt a brief amusement at his son's simple lecture-room explanations, and then wondered uneasily if Roy knew that his degrees were forged. He frowned, trying to follow.

"The twentieth-century cosmogonists had to deal with a confusing array of concepts," Roy went on. "Electrons and protons, neutrons and mesotrons and barytrons, photons and light waves, electric fields and magnetic fields and momentum fields and gravity fields. Already they were beginning to grope for a unified-field theory, but they never quite perceived all those things as manifestations of the same ultimate unit. It's no wonder they never quite understood the Sun, or how the planets came to be born from it!"

"But you do?" Kellon was interested, in spite of himself.

Roy nodded eagerly, and touched the gadget again.

"I think I do," he said. "It is hard to believe that the existence of planets depends on a freakish accident. In my theory, a star forms planets as normally as it radiates energy. Even now, the Sun is emitting unitron mass at the rate of about four million tons a second. I believe that planets have been condensed out of emitted unitron matter, by a combination of several processes, over periods as long as the life of the stars."

Roy's gray eyes were shining.

"That is my hypothesis—that every normal star has formed planets of its own. The tidal theories allowed only a handful of habitable planets in the entire galaxy. I believe there may be—millions!" His quick hand gestured, with the gadget. "Of course, it is still only a hypothesis—though the Outstation astronomers have found evidence of planets about several of the nearer single stars. But I'm going to find out!"

He searched Kellon's face.

"Do you see it, father?"

Heavily, Kellon shook his rugged white-wigged head.

"Your argument sounds reasonable enough," he admitted. "Once at the Outstation I saw a graph that had some little dips they said meant planets. But what of it? I don't see anything to get excited about."

Tears of frustration came into Roy's eager eyes.

"I can't understand it," he whispered bitterly. "Nobody gets excited. Nobody cares." His bronzed head lifted defiantly. "But the engineers of a hundred years ago would have been building ships to explore those planets!"

"I don't think so," Kellon objected wearily. "It would be too far for commerce. The moons of Saturn haven't been visited for sixty years. Right now, our Jovian outposts are losing money. Supplies and transportation cost more than we get back. If it wasn't for Union prestige, I would abandon them today."

"Science has been slipping back, ever since the uranium process was lost." Roy's face was troubled. "I don't know why." His brown chin lifted. "But we can go on. The unitron drive can be improved. With time and money, I could build an interstellar ship!"

"Maybe you could," Kellon said. "If you are fool enough to want to die on some strange, barren world that men never even saw—when I have an interplanetary empire to give you!"

"I guess I'm just that kind of fool," Roy said quietly. "I don't want an empire."

Kellon lost his temper, then.

"I'm going to cut off your allowance," he shouted at the white-lipped boy. "That will stop this nonsense. Come to me whenever you are ready to take up militechnics."

"You had better go back to Selene du Mars," Roy told him, in a thin, low voice. "I don't need the allowance."

And that was true. Within a few months, Kellon learned that Roy had designed a new type drive-field coil for the unitron transports in the Jovian service. It saved three days in the long run out to Jupiter, and increased the power recovery in deceleration nearly forty percent.

For the first time in twenty years, the Callistonian mines showed a tiny profit. Roy's fees, paid by the Union Transport Authority, were a hundred times the cut-off allowance.

In the five years since, Kellon hadn't seen his son. Roy had ignored an invitation he made Selene send. But he knew, through the Goon Department, that Roy was still at the old unitronics laboratory, furiously busy with his research. Learning that his funds were running low, Kellon had ordered the Transport Authority to double the promised royalties. Roy had replied with a brief note of thanks.

Now, standing stunned and alone amid the whirling dancers under the green-glowing murals of the Neptune Room, Boss Kellon felt a crushing need to see that thin, determined face, that was so much like Ruth's had been.

But Roy had failed him. Under the burden of the tottering Union, he stood all alone. There was no other that he could trust completely. And Marquard's thin, frightened whisper goaded him back to face the present grim emergency.

"The Preacher's in Sunport," the distracted Goon chief repeated. "His followers already know. Mob gathering in Union Square." His lean shoulders shrugged, in a helpless bewilderment. "Delicate situation, your genius."

"Delicate, hell!" Kellon caught his breath, and decision flashed in his shrewd blue eyes. He had fought alone before, and he could again. "Search the drainage levels," he ordered crisply. "Arrest the Preacher."

"Is your genius sure—" Marquard blinked uncertainly. "He has terrific influence. Before he came, it might have been safe. Now his followers will make trouble."

"I'll handle trouble when it happens." Kellon stiffened his big shoulders, and managed to smile again. He must hide the black panic that swept him. "Don't kill him," he added. "Just bring him in. Martyrs are dangerous."

"Your genius commands."

The thin man turned nervously away, the frown of worry cut deeper in his dark face. The orchestra throbbed on—playing from a high platform whose glowing plastic decorations represented an ice cave on Triton, Neptune's once-visited moon. Kellon started back to Selene du Mars.

She was waiting, slim and tall in the flashing green sequins. Even her smile was hard and bright and beautiful. Kellon felt an eager little quickening of his pulse, for he still loved Selene. Then he saw that she was smiling for another man.

Admiral Hurd came striding across the crowded floor. Black-and-orange pajamas were cut to emphasize the broad triangle of his shoulders. He was young and tall and dark. His toothy smile flashed, and he greeted Selene by the militechnic title she claimed:

"May I, Miss Captain?" Then he saw that Kellon was approaching. A kind of wary alertness tensed his face, and the smile that erased it was a little too broad. "If your genius will allow?"

"Darling, you look tired."

Selene turned the white dazzle of her smile on him, and slipped into the dashing admiral's arms before he could respond. Left alone on the floor, Kellon felt a tired envy for Hurd's youth and looks and vigor. Really, he was getting old.

He watched Hurd and Selene, dancing cheek to cheek. Her eyes were closed; her restless face seemed relaxed for once, and happy. But he caught a covert glance from Hurd's dark eyes, watchful, oddly hostile.

Turning wearily away, Kellon felt another surge of black regret for his son. If they had not quarreled, Roy might now have been in command of the Fleet, instead of Hurd. The new admiral was brilliant, and his record was clear, but Kellon didn't like him.

Kellon left the ballroom, escorted unobtrusively by his Goon bodyguards. He crossed the vast, silent Moon Room, to a terrace that looked down over Union Square.

It was night, and Sunport after dark was a view that had always stirred him. The towers were wide apart. Façades of luxion plastics turned them to tapering, graceful pylons of soft and many-colored fire. Their changing splendor lit the broad parks between, and stood inverted in a hundred pleasure lakes. The surface ways were broad curving ribbons of light, alive with the glowing cars of joy-riding engineers. A few pleasure gliders floated above the landing terraces, colored eggs of crystal light.

Sometimes, with an ache of longing, Kellon recalled his first rare glimpses of this bright and magical scene. For his childhood had been lived in the lower levels. It was only on infrequent holidays that he was allowed to come up into the parks, where he could see this forbidden, shining paradise of the engineers.

How mad his dreams had been! Ten million others must have dreamed them, but only he had come up to take the city for his own. Sometimes even yet the hard-won victory seemed altogether incredible. Nor ever had it been the pure untroubled delight he had dreamed of. Heavily, he sighed.

"Your genius!" The husky officer of the bodyguard stopped him in the wide arch of the terrace doorway, where drafts were checked only by a film of moving air. "The terrace may be dangerous—there's an ugly mob below."

"Thanks, major." He shrugged, and pushed on. He couldn't afford to yield to the fear in him. Confidence was his safest armor. "You know this is my favorite view."

But tonight the picture was grimly different.

The long rectangle of Union Square, below him, was gray with pressing crowds. From this elevation, the surging masses looked like some strange vermin, crawling about the bases of these mighty, shining, clean-lined towers that he loved.

Scores of bonfires glared, points of angry red. His nostrils stung to a whiff of paper burning. Faint with distance, the angry buzz of voices came up to him. Evangelists were screaming hoarsely, and shrill voices sang. He caught a snatch from the "Battle Hymn of God":

"Burn the books and break the gears!
Kill Antichrist and engineers!"

Kellon stood there a long time, until his sweaty hands set cold upon the shining rail. He was sick with a fear that all these glowing towers would crumble into that gray ocean of blind destruction. But Melkart said there was nothing left that he could do.

Suddenly his cold body jerked to a brittle clatter of automatic gunfire. A mile from him, at the end of the square, gray mankind was flowing like a queer, viscid liquid over the bright-lit surface way: Cars were seized and capsized in that live flood, like small, glowing beetles.

Tiny screams reached him. Black Goon cars appeared on the shining pavement, and guns crackled again. It was too far to distinguish individual human forms, moving or dying. But the mass of the gray wave drew reluctantly back. The stream of traffic halted, and the light went out of the luxion pavement.

Anxiously, Kellon went back through the archway in the softly glowing wall—it was pulsating tonight with soft and slowly changing hues of violet and rose. He wondered briefly if quieter colors and a slower beat would seem more confident.

In the silent, cyclopean Moon Room, he hurried to the telephore desk. He dropped impatiently on his seat in the U-shaped slot, with the stereo prisms standing in a half circle before him. In the center screen, the bright image of the red-haired operator was a little smaller than life.

"Get me Marquard," he rapped. The girl nodded silently, and the dark, thin features of the Goon chief sprang into the next crystal oblong. Kellon couldn't keep the rasping tension out of his voice. "Have you got the Preacher?"

"Not yet, your genius," Marquard replied in his habitual jerky, nervous whisper. "Mob is getting ugly. Looted the park library and made fires of the books. Started smashing pleasure cars on Union Way. Had to kill a few of them, to rescue an engineer and his girl. Diverted traffic." His worried eyes blinked uneasily. "Maybe we ought to clean the square?"

"No," Kellon told him—it was good to be able to make one more sure and instant decision. "The dead ones are martyrs. Leave them alone. They'll howl themselves exhausted and go back to their warrens."

"I hope so," Marquard whispered faintly.

"Just catch the Preacher, and send him to me." Kellon nodded at the operator, and the Goon chief vanished from the prism. "Reference Department." He spoke to a dyspeptic-looking female. "Show me the latest Goon report on the Preacher." The document was projected in the next screen.

Special Report No. 45-H-198
Union Goon Office, Sunport, E.
February 30, 2145

BY: Goon Operative GK-89 (R. A. Meyer, Politicotechnic Engineer).

SUBJECT: Eli Catlaw, alias the Preacher of the Revelation, alias the Word of God, alias the King of Kings. Labor No. G-496-HN-009. Escaped convict, Mars Penal Reservation, No. 45-V-18. Wanted for murder of guard. Believed now in America, but whereabouts unknown. *Note: Catlaw is a dangerous character. Liquidation recommended.*

Tapping a key to change the pages, Kellon skimmed significant passages. "Catlaw was born in the Ozark District, of labor-class parents. . . . Mother's claim to illegitimate technical blood probably false. . . . Transported to Mars for assault on engineer. . . . Guard murdered, in escape. . . . Catlaw reached Venus Commonwealth on ore ship. . . . Became 'swamp walker' and successful herb trader. . . . 'Conversion' and preaching dates from recovery from attack of jungle fever. . . . Returned to Earth about nine years ago, to lead underground 'Crusade' against Union. . . . Enabled to evade many Goon raids by vast popular support. . . . Treason charges against Union factions. . . . Catlaw has incited assassination and sabotage. . . . His program implies total destruction of technical civilization."

Kellon finished the report. He sat staring into the empty prism, as gravely as if he could read there the end of Sunport and all his world. He had scarcely moved, an hour later, when Marquard brought in the Preacher.

Eli Catlaw seemed almost unaware of the burly Goons who gripped his arms. He was lank and tall in faded gray overalls, and he stood erect and defiant. His dark, hollow eyes stared arrogantly past Kellon, at the lofty luxion murals that illuminated the room. Kellon's shrewd eyes studied the man, against the background in the Goon report. Thick lips and high cheeks and stiff black hair showed Negro and Indian blood. The yellow face was long and angular and stern. At last the sullen, hostile eyes came back to Kellon's face, but obviously the Preacher didn't intend to speak first.

Kellon turned on his frank, confident smile.

"I'm glad to see you, Catlaw," he said smoothly. "I'm sorry if this is inconvenient for you, but it was the only way I knew to get your point of view."

The boss paused invitingly, but the Preacher said nothing. He stood absolutely motionless, between the big men who held him. His burning eyes stared bleakly away, through the far, glowing murals.

"I know that times are difficult." Kellon kept his voice suave and even. "The exhaustion of the Jovian mines has caused depression. All the heavy industries are almost dead, and labor has naturally suffered. But I personally am deeply concerned for the comfort and welfare of the masses. And I assure you that the Union will earnestly consider any reform measures you will suggest."

Kellon paused again. Stillness whispered in the long Moon Room.

Beneath the mighty glowing murals, that showed station domes and robot miners and long unitron transports against a background of towering lunar peaks and star-shot space, the little group at the telephore desk seemed queerly insignificant. The room seemed too vast for its builders.

Now at last the Preacher spoke. His long, stern face showed no response to Kellon's persuasive smile, and he ignored Kellon's arguments. In a tense, grating, stifled voice, he began quoting texts from the Revelation:

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit. . . . Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come."

Kellon's smile had turned a little pale.

"Are you crazy?" He coughed against a troublesome rasp in his throat. "I suppose you mean Sunport?" His bewilderment was honest. "But Sunport is civilization!"

Stiff and insolent, the Preacher croaked:

"He that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. . . . Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine; and she shall be utterly burned with fire. . . . In one hour is she made desolate. . . . And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all."

Kellon leaned over the curving desk, with a look of earnest puzzlement.

"I don't understand you, Catlaw," he protested gravely. "Do you want to wreck all that men have accomplished? Do you want the future to forget the power of science? Do you want to turn men back into naked savages, and wipe out civilization?"

"Civilization?" The Preacher made a harsh snorting laugh. "Your glittering civilization is itself the Harlot of Babylon, poisoning all that yield to her painted lure. The science you revere is your false prophet. Your machines are the very Beast of the Apocalypse."

He gulped a hoarse breath.

"Yea, Armageddon and the Kingdom are at hand!"

"Listen to me," begged Kellon. "Please—"

Catlaw jerked angrily in the grasp of the Goons.

"I have come to destroy this last, most evil Babylon." His metallic, pulpit voice rang through the long Moon Room. "Even as the angels of God once smote the wicked cities of the plain, Sodom and

Gomorrah. And every engineer shall be burned with the fire of the Lord—save that he repents tonight!"

His yellow face was a stern, rigid mask.

"I warn you, Antichrist. Repent tonight, and follow me." The cunning of the swamp trader glittered briefly in his hollow eyes. "Turn your power to the path of God, and I will receive you into the Kingdom. Tomorrow will be too late."

Kellon rose, gasping for breath.

"Listen!" His voice trembled. "I fought to rule Sunport. And I'll fight to preserve it from you and all the lunatics who follow you. Not just because it is mine. But because it is the storehouse of everything great that men have created."

"Then you are damned!" Scuffling with the Goons, Catlaw shook a dark, furious fist. "With all your city of evil."

Kellon's voice dropped grimly.

"I'm not going to kill you, Catlaw. Because you are probably more dangerous dead than alive, just now. But I know that you are a fugitive from the Union, with an untried murder charge waiting for you. I'm sending you to the Outstation prison, tonight, to await trial for murder."

He nodded at the Goons, and they dragged the prisoner away.

Kellon sat down heavily at the telephore desk. The Preacher unnerved him. It was hard for him to understand that deadly, destroying hatred, that blindness to all reason. But he knew that it was multiplied many million times in the gray-clad masses under the Union. He thought of the howling mob of the Preacher's fanatics about the foot of this very tower, and he was afraid.

But he must not yield to fear.

"Get me the militechnic reservation," he told the telephore operator. "The Admiralty Office. Hurd's at the ball, but I'll talk to the officer in charge."

The efficient redhead nodded, in the center prism. Kellon was astonished when the next screen lit with the dark, handsome features of Admiral Hurd, himself.

"Your genius looks surprised." Hurd flashed his easy, white-toothed smile. "But I left the ball, after one dance with Miss Captain du Mars. I had reports of this crisis, and I felt it my duty to be ready for your commands."

"Thank you, admiral." Kellon tried to put down an uncomfortable feeling that Hurd was far too alert and dutiful. "I have arrested the Preacher. His followers may try to set him free. I want a cruiser to take him to the Outstation prison, as soon as possible."

"At once, your genius. I was expecting duty, and my flagship is hot. I'll take the prisoner myself. The *Technarch* will be on the Goon Office terrace, to receive him, in five minutes."

Smiling, Hurd flickered out of the prism.

Kellon felt another stab of sharp regret that Roy had failed him. But he had no time to dwell upon his dim mistrust of Hurd. For the empty prism lit again, with Marquard's worried features.

"Your genius, the people know we caught the Preacher." The Goon chief's whisper was nervous and hurried. "Mob in the square getting ugly. Fighting the Goon cordons. I'm afraid they will attack the Tower."

Kellon caught his breath, and tried to keep smiling. He felt confused and tired. He was afraid that any violent action would jar the human volcano under Sunport into terrible eruption.

But something had to be done. Some display of confidence was necessary, to help the morale of his supporters. He lifted his big shoulders, and groped for his old habit of instant decision.

"I'll talk to them," he told Marquard. "They can't all be as mad as Catlaw. I'll tell them who butters their bread." He smiled a little, as he turned to the operator. Any action made him feel better. "I'll speak from the terrace," he said, "on the Tower telephore."

"Wait, your genius," the Goon chief objected anxiously. "The terrace is dangerous. Automatic arms in the mob. Afraid the demonstration has support from some faction in the Union. My operatives still looking for evidence. Better keep out of range."

"I'll speak from the terrace," Kellon repeated.

Of course, he might be killed. Fear was a cold, crawling thing inside him. But he had faced death before. Now a display of perfect confidence was the best weapon he could use. He prepared to conceal his gnawing unease.

The touch of a key dropped the telephore desk into the lavatory below, a hall of glowing luxion almost as splendid as the huge Moon Room. Kellon adjusted the white toupee. A servant rouged his heavy jowls back to a cheerful glow. He tried to rinse the dry rasp out of his throat.

The elevator section lifted him back to the Moon Room. He walked back through the glowing luxion arch, to the lofty terrace. The telephore stand here had only two prisms. Standing between them, he could look down across Union Square.

Now the pavements had been darkened, all around the square. Surface traffic was stopped. That gray, human sea had grown until it overflowed the ways, to the shining bases of the towers beyond. The hum of voices had a lowered, vicious tone.

Kellon spoke to the operator in the prism beside him. The wall behind—and all the illuminated faces of the Union Tower—began to flash, red and dark, red and dark, to gain attention. That ugly buzzing ceased, and he nodded. The crown of the Tower became a cool, steady violet.

"People of Sunport." From the three-hundred-foot screen in the wall beneath him, his giant image looked down over the mob. Magnified to the depth of thunder, his voice rolled out of a thousand speakers. "My friends, the action I have taken tonight was taken for your own good."

He trusted the old magic of his frank, robust smile and his candid, booming voice. After all, he had talked his way to victory over better men than Eli Catlaw. But that breathless quiet lasted only a moment, before the defiance of the mob rolled up to him at the slow speed of sound. It was a monstrous animal bellow.

"My friends, listen to me." At his quick nod, the operator stepped up the volume of that tremendous voice. "Listen to reason." A bullet slapped against the cold, glowing wall behind him. Stinging particles of plastic showered him. But fortunately the telephore picked up only a muffled thump. "What can you gain from the Preacher?"

Boos and jeers roared up from the mob.

"The Preacher has told you to destroy the machines." He tried to drown that defiant bellow. "He has told you to kill the men who create and control them. But think what you owe to machines—everything! Obey the Preacher, and the most of you will perish—"

Brrrram!

A dull but mighty concussion rocked the terrace. Kellon glimpsed flying debris, spreading out in a giant fan from somewhere beneath him. Black smoke overtook it, and covered the mob in a billowing cloud. His knees were shaking, and his throat went dry. But he tried to go on:

"The most of you will perish—"

But the amplifiers were dead. His natural voice was wholly lost in the blasting echoes that came rolling back through the smoke from the distant towers. The telephore was out of order. Even the operator's image was gone. He shouted hoarsely at it, and clicked the call key. But the prisms remained empty.

He stood clutching the edges of the stand. He felt bewildered and ill, too dazed even to wonder actively what had happened. At last the smoke came up about him, in a choking, blinding cloud. He stumbled back into the Moon Room.

"Your genius!" Frightened members of the bodyguard met him in the doorway. "Are you hurt?" The officer told him: "It was a bomb. Under the giant screen. Spies must have set it."

The telephore in the Moon Room was still working. Kellon dropped weakly in his seat in the slot, with a grateful smile at the white-lipped operator. He told the redhead to call the Goon Office. Marquard answered, his jerky whisper briefly relieved:

"Afraid they had got you, boss." Alarm came back to his thin, dark face. "Thing is worse than I thought. Widespread plot. Organization. Probably Preacher is the leader, but engineers were in it. Got surprising quantities of arms and explosives, and experts to use them."

Kellon managed a hard, little grin.

"Evidently it isn't sinful to use machines—when they're guns."

The Goon chief was too harassed to smile.

"Watch for your life, boss," he whispered. "Warn your guards. May strike anywhere. Rioters smashing cars and storming buildings and murdering engineers, all over the city. Union Tower may be next."

Kellon drew a long breath. His shaken nerves were recovering from the blast.

"Chin up, chief!" His rouged smile was easier. "We'll handle things. I'll call Hurd, and have him stand by with the Fleet. We may need a few tons of tickle powder dropped out of space. There's nothing like a couple of hundred thousand tons of long, black unitron cruiser to instill respect." He turned to the watchful redhead. "Get me the *Technarch*."

The operator nodded. Her head bobbed a little in the prism, as her unseen hands sped over the switchboard. But the next prism remained blank. A puzzled expression came over her tense face. At last she told Kellon, "Your genius, the *Technarch* doesn't answer."

Icy, unreasoning panic clutched Kellon's heart.

"Get me the Admiralty Office."

A dazed-looking militechnic cadet informed him that Admiral

Hurd had taken the entire Fleet into space. "All the ships had been hot for twenty-four hours, sir," he stammered. "I understand the annual maneuvers are taking place, off the Moon."

Kellon made a stunned little nod, and the startled cadet was cut off. He stared at Marquard, still imaged in the adjacent prism. The Goon chief had seen and heard the cadet, and his lean, furrowed face reflected Kellon's consternation.

"The maneuvers were not to begin for a week," Kellon gulped uneasily. "Hurd shouldn't have begun them without an order from me." He shook his cragged head. "But—wholesale mutiny—it's too appalling to think of!"

Marquard made a tiny, bleating sound.

"That explains it, your genius," his whisper rasped. "Arms. Organization. Experts. Evidence that the Preacher had help from in the Union. He was plotting with Hurd." His pale face looked frightened. "Looks desperate, boss!"

"I won't believe it," muttered Kellon. He didn't dare believe it. Anxiously he told the tense-faced redhead, "Get me the Outstation. Manager General Nordhorn. At once."

The Union's supremacy—and his own—depended on control of space. To that end, the Fleet and the Outstation were equally essential. That artificial moonlet was scarcely a mile in diameter, but an oftenproved proverb ran, "The master of the Outstation will be master of the planets."

The tiny metal moon had a twenty-four-hour period, which kept it swinging always to the south of Sunport's zenith. At first it had served merely as observatory, laboratory and steppingstone to space. But the militechnic engineers of the Commonwealth, the Corporation and the Union had thickened its massive armor of meteoric iron, until it was the Gibraltar of the system. The theoretical range of its tremendous guns extended around the Earth and out to the Moon.

"Hurry!" Kellon croaked. Breathless with impatience, he watched the red-haired operator. She fumbled with her unseen controls, as if there was some difficulty. But at last Nordhorn's thin, dark face flashed into the prism.

Manager General Nordhorn was an old man, bent and yellowed and deaf. He should have been retired years ago. But few younger men had shown steadfast loyalty—and even those few, like Marquard, were usually of indifferent ability. Something had happened to the fine tradition of the militechnic service.

"Has Hurd arrived?" Nordhorn cupped a trembling yellow hand to his ear, and Kellon shouted: "I have arrested the Preacher. I sent Hurd to carry him out to prison. He took the Fleet to space, and he doesn't answer the telephore. There may be trouble. Better call your men to action stations—"

Kellon's voice dried up. Nordhorn had looked sternly composed. But now, as he gulped to speak, Kellon saw the evidence of desperate emotion in his bloodless cheeks and his thin, quivering lips.

"Your genius, Hurd has already called." His voice quavered, uncertainly. "I was just about to call you. Hurd did not mention any prisoner. He delivered an ultimatum. A shocking thing, your genius—I can't quite understand—he demanded that I surrender the Outstation!" Nordhorn's yellow Adam's apple jerked, as he swallowed. "Your orders, sir?"

Blood drummed in Kellon's ears. Cold with sweat, his hands clutched the edges of the desk. In spite of all the evidence, the completeness of this disaster was still incredible. He tried to steady his reeling brain. Hoarsely he ordered:

"You will defend the Station—to the last."

"To the last." Nordhorn's white head lifted proudly. "But the situation is desperate, sir." A stunned bewilderment came back to his face. "I can't understand—things are happening so fast. But mutiny is reported in some of the gun crews. Men are fighting in the spaceward bays now."

"Hold out—" begged Kellon. But suddenly the haggard-faced old general was swept out of the prism. He clicked the call key desperately, and shouted at the operator, "Get back Nordhorn!"

"I'm sorry, your genius," the tense girl told him. "The Outstation doesn't answer."

Marquard's sick, shaken face was still in the other screen. For his benefit, Kellon tried to grin. "So Hurd and the Preacher are in bed together?" he muttered. "Which do you say will manage to kick the other out?"

"Won't matter, if the Station falls," rasped the Goon chief's hasty whisper. He listened. "Excuse me, your genius. The riot bureau is calling me. Remember—watch your life!"

His image was gone. Aimlessly, Kellon stalked up and down the pale-glowing luxion floor of the long Moon Room. What next? The news from the Outstation had shaken him more than the explosion under the terrace. He felt numbed and ill. Still the Station didn't answer, and he knew nothing useful to do.

The ball was still going on in the Neptune Room, the officer of his bodyguard told him. Even the telephore newsmen had as yet received little hint of the real gravity of the situation. The bright-clad dancers didn't know that their world was at the brink of catastrophe.

Perhaps that was the trouble. If the engineering class had danced less—if they had learned more and done more about the other nine-tenths of the population—things might have been different. But Melkart said it was three generations late to think of that.

"Boss!" a guard shouted. "Look out!"

Shots echoed against the high, glowing murals. Somewhere a woman screamed. Fighting men surged through the wide arch from the Neptune Room. The lights went out in the luxion panels. An automatic clattered in the dark.

The broad connecting doorway had been closed only with the sound-absorbing air screen. Now Kellon heard a muffled *woosh!* The armored safety panel had lifted, but too late. The attackers were already in the Moon Room.

In the faint glow that came through the terrace arch, he glimpsed crouching, darting figures. An arm threw something over the fighting Goons. It crashed beside him. Desperately he groped for it, hurled it toward the far end of the room, dropped flat behind the telephore desk.

His ears rang, and the immense dark room was alive with screaming metal. He rose behind the desk, snatching a hidden automatic from under the seat. But the shooting had stopped. Light flowed back into the high luxion murals.

Three men were lying still inside the closed archway. One made a thin, whimpering sob, and a frightened Goon fired a final shot into his head. The officer came running anxiously to Kellon.

"Is your genius all right?"

Kellon managed to grin.

"Attempt No. 17." He was glad of the rouge on his face. No other attempt had ever come quite so close, or made him feel so weak inside. He dragged his eyes away from the ruin at the end of the room, where the bomb had shattered a cragged lunar peak into dusty rubble. "Who were they?"

Already the Goons were examining the three dead men. Their fingerprints were swiftly identified by telephore. One of them proved to be an hereditary engineer, who had failed in the examinations for a practical militechnic degree. The other two were members of the auxiliary white-collar class.

"The engineer must have come with the guests," the guard officer reported. "The others were among the musicians. They had guns and the bomb in instrument cases." He caught his breath. "I regret this terribly, your genius. But let me congratulate your personal courage, with the bomb."

Courage! Kellon shrugged and turned quickly away from the still figures in their gay bloodstained rags. There was already an odor. Death made him ill. If he had been an instant slower—desperation wasn't courage. His voice came harsh and loud:

"Get them out and clean the floor." Then he thought of Selene du Mars. Concern sharpened his tone. "There was fighting in the ballroom? Was anyone hurt? Find out if Miss Captain du Mars was hurt."

The safety door dropped again. Anxiety made him follow the questioning Goons. An ominous, hysterical tension met him in the vast green-glowing Neptune Room. Cold-eyed officers were grilling the frightened musicians. Half the guests were gone. The rest were gathered in pale-faced groups, chattering nervously.

He couldn't find Selene. The guards at the main entrance, off the public glider terrace, had not seen her among the departing guests. But she had vanished early in the evening.

Apprehension seized him. In spite of her scheming ambition—or even because of it—he loved Selene. He knew that the Preacher's followers hated her savagely, as the very symbol of all that was denied them. She might be abducted, perhaps even murdered.

He hurried back to the telephore in the bomb-shattered Moon Room, and called her suite on the floor below. The dark Eurasian major-domo said she had not come in. But the red-haired operator told him:

"Your genius, there's a recorded message from Miss Captain du Mars. It was left two hours ago, to be delivered whenever you called for her. Will you receive it?"

Kellon nodded, suddenly voiceless.

Selene's face came into the crystal block. The fire diamonds burned in her platinum hair. Their changing blaze went blue as her clear eyes, and redder than her lips. Her voice came, cool and hard and perfect.

"Harvey, I am leaving you tonight. We shall not meet again. This is to thank you for all you have given me, and to tell you why I have gone. It isn't because you are getting old, or because I think you are slipping—believe me, I wouldn't go because of that. But I'm in love with Admiral Hurd. By the time you hear this, we shall be in space together. I'm sorry, Harvey."

Kellon sat for a long time at the telephore desk. He felt numb and cold. In a hoarse voice, he told the operator to run it over. Selene smiled again, and wiped away the same solitary jewel-bright tear, and spoke the same gem-hard words.

She lied. Kellon stared blankly at the mural the bomb had shattered—his own life was darkened and broken, like the luxion panel. He clenched his fists in a sick and useless fury. Of course she lied!

Maybe she did love Hurd. The traitor had looks and youth. That would be no wonder. But it wasn't love that made her go with him. He knew Selene too well to accept that. She had gone with Hurd because she expected him to be the next master of the world.

"Run it again," he told the operator. "Without the sound." And he greeted the silent image with a tired, bitter grin. "Good hunting, Selene," he whispered. "After all, we've had our day. Good hunting—but you and your dashing admiral had better watch the Preacher!"

The lone tear fell, and she vanished once more.

And presently Kellon told the operator to try the Outstation again. Selene wasn't everything. Tonight the world was at stake. His life, and hers. The Union, and Sunport. The game was being played, far out in the silent cold of space. Between an old man's loyalty and a young one's ruthless ambition. Between the old world he had conquered and one unknown. He could only wait for the issue. There was nothing else to do.

But the Outstation didn't answer.

"Nothing, your genius," the operator said. "There has been nothing from space since General Nordhorn was cut off."

Wearily restless, Kellon rose from the desk. The dead men had been taken away. But he thought that the faint, sickening smell of death still hung in the room. He felt cold, and his big body was haunched with tension. And he felt desperately alone.

Then he thought of Melkart.

The old philosopher-historian was one man who ought to know what was happening to Sunport. Often in the past his somewhat Machiavellian advice had been useful. Almost before Kellon knew it, his restless feet were taking him through the Saturn Room.

That immense hall was his library. Books walled it, four galleries high. Vaults beneath held microfilm copies of all known literature. Kellon left his guards outside the historian's office.

Charles Melkart occupied a tiny alcove. The white-glowing walls were bare, but one huge window gave a spectacular view of the shining, night-cloaked city. A huge, ancient, wooden desk took up nearly half the room. It was piled untidily with books and stacks of manuscript.

As if unaware of any trouble outside, Melkart sat behind the desk, writing swiftly with an old-fashioned pen. He was a small, stooped man. He wore a wrinkled lounging robe. A red wool skullcap covered his baldness. He blinked as Kellon entered and took off his spectacles. In his wizened, yellow face, his eyes looked strikingly young and alive.

"Sit down, Wolfe." Melkart never fawned. "I was expecting you."

Wolfe! That had been Kellon's party name. He remembered secret meetings, down in the drainage levels, where the cold walls sweated and the air was alive with the throb of pumps. That was in the old, dangerous days, before they gave up the fight for the forbidden ideals of democracy.

Suddenly Kellon wondered if Melkart and Ruth had really been in love. He dismissed the thought. That hadn't mattered, for many years. The New Commonwealth was a forgotten dream. Melkart had left his idealism, with his health, in the carnotite mines of Mars. And the parole had settled whatever debt there might have been.

But Melkart had given him a great deal—besides Roy's mother. The lean, brilliant New Zealander had taught him the science of politics. His degrees had been forged at the party headquarters, to make him a more useful agent. When the Corporation shattered the underground organization, Kellon had managed to escape with most of the party funds.

Kellon had attempted to repay him with some high position in the Union. But the sardonic ex-radical declined to accept anything more than the needs of his simple life, and use of the vast library in the Saturn Room.

"You have made the solar system into a laboratory for the test of my politicotechnic theories," he said, with his thin, yellow grin. "Now all I want is time to finish writing 'Destiny.' "

Now, when he came into the scholar's narrow room, Kellon was too perturbed to take the single chair beside the cluttered desk. He walked to the great window. The rioters made a gray, uneasy sea below, flecked with the scarlet of fires. A distant explosion jarred the air; a machine gun rattled; the drone of voices lifted angrily.

Melkart picked up his pen to make some hurried note.

Pale and tense, nails biting into his palms, Kellon turned back from the window. In a hoarse, desperate voice he asked the lean old man at the desk:

"Charles—do you know what is happening to Sunport?"

The red fez nodded.

"I've known for thirty years," Melkart grinned, with owlish assurance. "Old Giovanni Vico had a glimmer of it, with his 'law of cycles,' back in the seventeen hundreds. Spengler and Toynbee glimpsed it. Sprague, later, saw farther. But it remained for me to reduce the laws of the rise and fall of human cultures to the exact science that I call *destiny*." His yellow, clawlike hand gestured quickly at a huge manuscript. "Here, in my last volume—"

"Listen!" Kellon's fist banged the desk in interruption. "I've no time for books. The gray class is rioting. The Fleet has mutinied. The Outstation is under attack—if it falls, we'll be bombarded from space. Already assassins have attacked me once tonight."

He made a harsh, mirthless laugh.

"Books! Can you sit here writing a book, when the Preacher's fanatics are burning libraries in the park? They are murdering every engineer they can lay hands on. Who will be left to read your precious book?"

Melkart's fleshless, yellow visage grinned.

"Nobody, I'm afraid," he said slowly. "It is tragic that cultures must reach the point of breakdown before they can breed men able to understand them. But lack of understanding does not change the truth. Every fact you mention is inevitable. Because now Sunport is dead—a petrifact."

"Petrifact—you're insane!" Kellon slammed the desk again. "This is no time for your pessimistic theories. I want to know something to do." His voice sank, pleading. "You have helped me before. There must be—something."

Melkart closed a big book, and Kellon saw that the yellow fingers trembled.

"You and I are finished, Wolfe." His voice was slow and regretful. "Because the soul of Sunport is dead. You see, a city or a nation or a culture is something more than the sum of the individuals that make it up. Sunport was born, back in 1978, when the first rocket blasted off Toltec Mesa. It was created to conquer space. It did, and that supreme victory made it the greatest megalopolis the world has seen."

"That's history," Kellon muttered impatiently. "What's the matter today?"

"Space is conquered," Melkart told him, "and that great idea is dead. Because life doesn't stand still. Disused functions are lost. After the victory was won, Sunport failed to discover a new purpose to keep her alive. Therefore, she died. It makes no difference that ninety million new barbarians live on in these dead towers."

Kellon had moved to speak, but Melkart added sardonically:

"That's as true of you, Wolfe, as it is of the city. You aren't a tenth the man you were thirty years ago, when you set out to smash what was left of the Corporation. You might have been a match for Eli Catlaw—then."

Kellon smoothed a frown of displeasure from his face.

"Please, Charles," he begged. "I know I'm getting old, but the Union is mine. Maybe I got it by arbitrary methods, but it is a trust. I've got to save it from the Preacher and his rabble, because the Union has created everything we call civilization."

"True." Melkart's red-capped skull nodded gravely. "The engineers were a creative minority—a hundred years ago. A small group of experts conquered space—and thereby created more wealth than mankind had ever owned before.

"Inevitably, the creative power of the engineers resulted in political dominance. Unfortunately, however, they have ceased to create. Now their spendthrift children merely loot the wealth their fathers earned, and play their silly game of hereditary degrees. And Sunport is as much a petrifact as the pyramids of old Egypt."

Kellon leaned over the untidy desk.

"Sunport is mine." His rugged face was pale under the rouge, and his low voice trembled. "I paid for it, with brains and toil and years. I worked and schemed and bribed and robbed and lied and killed. I lived in dread of assassination. I fought like a jungle animal for the city." He gulped a rasping breath. "I won't give it up."

"You said that," Melkart smiled his wry, yellow smile, "but you help establish my proposition. Because you completely fail to share the magnificent aspiration that created Sunport. Out of these restless millions of new nomads, you merely had superior cunning and audacity and luck.

"But men want to merge themselves in things greater than their individual lives. Destiny is the word I use, for those supernal living forces that exalt and give purpose to the lives of myriads.

"Sunport has fulfilled her destiny, and thereby lost it. But the Preacher has offered these new barbarians another destiny—a fresh, common purpose—that is on their own savage plane. That means that our world has ended, Wolfe."

Kellon stared at him silently.

"You're lost, Melkart," he said at last. "You will still be sitting here, when the Preacher's fanatics come along to burn your book and cut your throat. I think that is the best criticism of your philosophy" —he swung aggressively toward the door—"but I'm not done."

Kellon went back to the bomb-torn Moon Room. Perhaps Melkart was right. Perhaps Sunport was doomed. But he wasn't ready to die. He sat down anxiously at the telephore desk, and told the operator to call the Outstation once more.

"I'll try, your genius." The girl was pale and jittery. "But I've been trying. They don't answer." Her voice was near hysteria. "The whole telephore system is breaking down. They have been smashing equipment and murdering operators."

"Get the Outstation!"

His voice was harsh with strain. He sat watching the busy girl. Unrest held him tense, but there was nothing he could do. The minutes dragged. There was no reply from space, until a terrible screaming came out of the sky.

The tower shuddered. A monstrous, bellowing vibration drowned all thought. The floor pitched. Concussion jarred Kellon's bones. The high luxion murals flickered and went dim. The plastic mosaic of a moon city turned black and came crashing down. The air was filled with choking dust.

The bombardment had begun.

No need to get the Outstation now. That first terrible projectile from space was enough to tell him that Hurd and the Preacher were victorious. The Outstation had been taken or destroyed.

Sunport was defenseless. True, there were huge batteries on the militechnic reservation, beside the spaceport. But, hampered by Earth's gravitation and the atmosphere, they were almost useless against attack from space—even if the plotters had failed to put them out of commission already.

Kellon shivered to something colder than personal fear. For he knew that Melkart was right. This was the end of Sunport. The Union was finished. The engineering class was doomed. Ahead he could see only ruin and chaos, ignorance and savage cruelty, darkness and despair.

"Get me Marquard!" he shouted at the frightened operator.

Now the Goon Department was the last feeble defense of civilization. But Sunport must be blacked out. The people must be warned to leave the city or take refuge on the lower levels. And he wanted to know where that first projectile had struck.

The Goon chief's head came into the crystal block. But it was sagging wearily back. Marquard's apprehensive frown was at last relaxed. There was a little dark hole at his temple. The operator made a tiny, stifled scream, and the peaceful face vanished.

"He's dead!" She listened, and began a tight-voiced explanation. "The office says he shot himself, when he learned—"

The second projectile cut her off.

The Union Tower shuddered again, like a giant live thing struck with some deadly harpoon. Concussion flung Kellon out of the seat. He was deafened, and the salt sweet of blood was on his lips.

He climbed back to the desk. But the operator's prism was blank. The dial lights were out. Frantically he jiggled the call key, but there was no response. The instrument was dead.

His ears ceased to ring. Suddenly he felt that the huge shattered room was queerly still. He shouted anxiously for his guards, but there was no reply. Peering into the dust, he saw that the officer lay motionless under a pile of rubble, in the broken archway. The others had fled.

He was alone.

Alone! That realization was appalling. Now the breakdown was complete. No longer was he boss of the Union. He was merely one among millions of frightened and bewildered human beings. The only order left was the organization of his enemies.

In his dazed aloneness, he was scarcely aware when the third projectile fell. But the light flickered, in all the luxion walls, and went out. He cried out, in the smothering dark. An ultimate purpose was awakened in him—the blind instinct for survival.

A dim glow from without guided him to the terrace. He saw that half the city's towers were still pulsating with the changing radiance of their luxion façades. The bombardment soon would black them out, he thought bitterly, forever.

Union Square was almost empty. A few stragglers of the gray mob still fled across the darkened ways. Near the base of the Tower, dust and smoke drifted out of an immense dark crater.

So near! Kellon shivered to a cold realization. The Union Tower was the target. The space bombardment was aimed at him! Because, by now, he was almost the last symbol of the Union's shattered power.

He ran back through the archway, to the roof elevator. Its luxion walls still glowed, and it shot upward when he pressed the controls. He stumbled out into a chill night wind, on the penthouse roof.

"Here!" he shouted, across the glider terrace. "Quick—haul out the *Ruth!*"

Then he saw that the terrace was deserted. The hangar yawned black and empty. The long crystal bubble of his unitron glider was gone. The crew must have fled with it when the bombardment began.

Kellon stood bewildered in the cold dark. He sobbed, and his fists were clenched impotently. The world had crumbled under him, and there was nothing he could do. Civilization had dissolved.

The fourth projectile came nearer still. An appalling vibration battered him. He dropped flat. The deck quivered, like part of a monster animal dying. The concussion stunned him.

He came to himself in the elevator. Its luxion walls were black. He fumbled in the dark for the controls. But the mechanism was dead. He flung himself into the dark emergency stair, and started running down the steps.

Presently, he supposed, when those guns in distant space had found the Tower's range exactly, the projectiles would come in salvos, instead of singly.

The black stair was endless, and his descent became a blurred nightmare. Blast followed blast, until he no longer tried to count them. The concussions were shattering blows against his very sanity.

Down and down, through dust and darkness. Once he tripped over something that felt like a body, and fell until a landing stopped him. His muscles jerked with fatigue. Stiff blood dried on his bruised temple.

Somewhere there were levels where the walls still glowed dimly. It was part of the administrative offices of the Union, for he glimpsed floor after floor covered with identical unending rows of glass cubicles and telephore desks and business machines. The mob must have been here, for he saw scattered bodies of Goons and grays. But the living had fled.

Still his numbed brain could function, in a disjointed way. For he realized that his bright dress pajamas would be a sure warrant of death, when he came down to the levels where the Preacher ruled. He stripped a gray-clad body, pulled the coarse garments over his own, and threw away the white toupee.

Sometimes black panic blotted out all awareness. Fatigue became a drug that destroyed memory and sensation. But he kept on his feet. He kept moving. Because he didn't want to die.

There was another stratum of darkness. Then somewhere he found an elevator that worked. It dropped him into the damp chill of the drainage levels. The concussions were now muffled with hundreds of feet of earth. But still they struck and struck and struck, numbing clubs of death.

Once he came to himself, and found that rubble had almost buried him. An air tube had caved above him. He dragged himself stiffly out of the debris. No bones were broken. He stumbled on. It was a long time before he realized that the bombardment had ceased.

A burst of automatic fire crashed out of a dark crossway. He ducked for cover. But a heavy, bloodstained man in gray lumbered into the pale, cold light of the tin luxion tube strung along the roof, and covered him with a Goon automatic.

"Halt, for Armageddon is at hand!"

"Yea, Brother!" Kellon managed to respond with a dazed quotation from the Preacher. "And the Kingdom is come."

"Pass, Brother." The man grinned at him, redly, and explained: "I am hunting engineers. I've killed seven." Kellon was about to pass, when the gun moved ominously. "Wait, have you heard the news?"

Kellon waited.

"Admiral Hurd tried to trick the Preacher." The red hunter chuckled triumphantly. "He was slain by the hand of God—and a well-flung knife. Now the Fleet is ours—if any ships are left, for they were last reported fighting one another."

Kellon's throat was suddenly dry.

"Selene—" he whispered. "What about Miss Captain du Mars?"

"Forget those words of Satan, Brother." The hunter licked his lips, with an unpleasant relish. "The harlot of Babylon is also dead. They say that she betrayed even the Antichrist, in the end. She was found with Hurd, aboard the Fleet. She took poison when he was killed, to escape the Preacher's wrath. Hallelujah!"

"Praise the Lord!" Kellon gasped hoarsely. "Good hunting, Brother."

He was sorry to learn of Selene's death. Yet he was certain that she had wasted no pity on herself. She had played the game to the end, by her own hard rules. The possibility of failure had been taken into her calculations, equally with success. The poison she had ready was proof enough of that.

Shock and bewilderment and fatigue made a black fog upon his mind. It was hard to remember what had happened. Hard to understand it. Like Selene, he had played by the rules that life had taught him. But now they no longer applied.

Once he hid from a mob that came splashing along a dark tube. They had flaring torches. Their leader carried a woman's head on a stake. They were singing the "Battle Hymn of God."

Dimly, he tried to understand what had turned human beings into such frightful things. Of course, the rule of the Union had been a heavy burden, but he remembered signing many measures for the relief of the masses. Melkart, he remembered, said that he was three generations late.

It was twenty years since Kellon had felt the wet chill of the drainage levels. But suddenly the last secret meeting of the New Commonwealth party seemed only yesterday. This intricate maze of dripping tunnels remained as familiar as if he had never left it.

Reeling to his burden of fatigue, he found a little niche that he had dug long ago in the side of a shaft above a drainage pump. He slept for a long time, and woke staring at the even marks of his drill still visible in the damp sandstone.

It gave him a curious and surprising pleasure to see that evidence of the old strength and skill of his hands. For it was a long time since he had even dressed himself completely without some aid.

He was hungry, but still the far past served him. He climbed, by a way he had known, to the freight levels. Traffic had ceased. He saw no Goons or workmen. In most sections, only a few pale emergency lights were glowing.

A few other looters were busy. He avoided them. Presently, he found a wrecked electric truck, and loaded his gray pockets from its cargo of hydroponic oranges and tinned imitation beef. He ate, and cached what was left in the little cave.

It was dawn of the second day when he came up a sloping freight ramp, into the tangled weeds and rusting metal and time-dulled luxion masonry of the long-abandoned Saturn Docks.

He was searching for his son.

It was five years, now, since their quarrel. He couldn't be sure that Roy would want to see him. But the bright shadow of Selene was no longer between them. He was lonely, and Roy was all he had left.

If his Tower had been the brain of the Union, the spaceport had been its pulsing heart. Remembering the great batteries on the militechnic reservation, he hoped that refugees from the bombarded city might have gathered here, to make a last defense upon the natural fortress of the mesa.

Eagerly, he pushed through the weeds toward the Venus Docks. Stumbling in the dim early light, he came upon a new mountain of fresh black earth and broken stone. The heart went out of him. He climbed wearily to the summit of the shell-built ridge.

Beyond, where the busy Venus Docks had been, was only a wide black chasm. Bitter fumes stung his nostrils. But it was more than the explosive reek that blurred his eyes with tears.

Chaos met him. The shell-torn mesa looked desolate as the crater-pitted Moon. Outside the Saturn Docks, scarcely any familiar structure was even a recognizable ruin. Death had plowed deep. Only a few twisted scraps of metal even hinted that docks and cradles and ships had ever existed.

Miles away, on the rough field of dark debris where the militechnic reservation had been, he saw a fallen cruiser. All the stern was gone, as if the magazine had exploded. The plates still glowed with red heat over the battery rooms, and smoke lifted a sharp thin exclamation point against the gloomy sky.

Sadly, he recognized the *Technarch's* lines.

Beyond the dead ship, Sunport was burning. A terrible red dawn glowed all across the east. But the low sky overhead remained dark with smoke from the conflagration. Hours dragged on, as he searched for the ruin of the unitronics laboratory where Roy had worked. But the Sun didn't rise.

It must have been noon when he came to what was left of the laboratory. Hope ebbed out of him, when he saw the shattered ruin of the dead luxion walls. For the old building had been directly hit.

A huge, yet-smoking pit opened where the left wing had been. The roof was torn off the massive gray walls. They were banked high with debris. It seemed impossible that anybody could have survived, in all the building.

"Who comes?"

Kellon whirled, startled. Behind him, a big man had risen silently from behind a mound of rubble. The labor number printed across the front of his gray overalls showed that he had been a dock worker. He carried a stubby automatic rifle.

"Steve Wolfe." Cautiously, Kellon answered with his old party name. "Freight handler."

"What do you want?"

"I'm looking for Engineer Roy Kellon," he said desperately. "I have a message for him. He worked in the unitronics lab. Do you know him? Was he hurt?"

The big man made no immediate reply. His keen eyes studied Kellon over the level gun. Puzzled and impatient, Kellon kicked uneasily at a bomb-tossed stone. At last, as if he had reached some decision, the guard nodded.

"I think you'll do. Come along, and I'll let you talk to Tom Pharr." He pointed with the gun toward a gap in the shattered wall. "Roy Kellon is here," he added, "but you will find it hard to deliver any message right now. Because he is buried under a thousand tons of rock."

Kellon walked ahead, through a maze of ruined rooms and roofless passages. He heard voices and the muffled clink of tools. Abruptly, his guide brought him upon a surprising scene.

A cracked, unroofed wall inclosed a long rectangle. It was piled deep with broken rock and debris, flung from the crater where the other wing had been. But scores of men and women were toiling desperately to move the rubble. They had half uncovered a long, mirror-bright torpedo shape. The guard hailed a slim young man in gray, who appeared to be in charge of the excavation.

"Pharr! Here's another man for you."

The slim youth came to meet them. Kellon knew him. He had seen him here at the laboratory when he came to beg Roy to give up his research. But his face showed no recognition, and Kellon was glad of it.

"Refugee?" Pharr asked quickly. "You don't like the Preacher? You want to leave Sunport?" Kellon scarcely had time to nod. "Are you willing to go to space?"

"I am." Kellon felt bewildered. "But I was looking for my . . . for Engineer Roy Kellon. Is he all right?"

"He's aboard the *Nova.*" Tom Pharr jerked a hurried thumb at the half-buried torpedo. "He'll be all right—if we can get him uncovered before the Preacher's fanatics get wind of us."

"That?" Puzzled, Kellon nodded at the bright spindle. "A spaceship?"

"Interstellar cruiser," Pharr explained swiftly. "We've been working on it, for years. It was almost ready to test. When the bombardment started, Roy tried to get it into space. The shell caught him.

"Lucky I was in the city—trying to find a crew. I got back in a glider, after the bombardment. I've been collecting refugees to dig him out." His quick eyes ran over the busy scores. "We'll save a tiny seed of civilization—if we get away."

Pharr's lean face betrayed faint worry.

"Some damage to the *Nova.* But Roy signaled that he is making repairs. Expects to be able to take off, as soon as we can get it uncovered. There's fuel enough for Venus or Mercury. But we'll have to find dynodes and supplies for the interstellar flight."

Eagerly, Kellon echoed, "Interstellar?"

Bright enthusiasm burned all the fatigue from Tom Pharr's face.

"Roy believes every star has planets of its own. Won't matter so much if dark ages come to Earth. Because we and our children will be sowing the seed of mankind across the stars." His intense eyes peered at Kellon. "Want to sign for the voyage?"

Kellon gulped in vain to speak. This was something more than a chance to escape the chaos of a crumbling world. Tom Pharr's quiet, brief words had painted a new vision, suggested a new purpose. He nodded mutely.

"Then get to work."

Kellon went to help a man and a girl who were trying to roll a raw new boulder away from the *Nova.* It was queerly comforting to be accepted as a member of this busy, efficient group. Never before had he quite realized how lonely the boss had been.

As the hours went on, he was scarcely conscious of fatigue. He wasn't much concerned with the blood that presently began to ooze from his soft, uncalloused hands. There was time for only a few brief words, but he began to feel an eager interest in these new companions.

A curiously assorted group. Burly dock hands in gray. A few young cadets who had survived the destruction of the militechnic college. A dozen veterans who had escaped from the Outstation in a life tube, when it was blown up. Engineers, white-collar workers, servants, grays.

But their one intense purpose had fused them all into a single unit. Class distinction was gone. Kellon noticed a pretty girl, in low-cut dance pajamas. She looked a little like Selene du Mars. But she was serving soup to a line of hungry stevedores in gray.

Melkart's dictum came back to him. Sunport was dead, because it had lost the purpose that created it. But this desperate, tattered little group was still somehow a vital entity. Because, as the old historian would have put it, they shared a destiny.

Night fell again. Still Sunport was burning. Smoke blotted out the stars. The eastward horizon was a wall of terrible red. Lightless towers stood against it, broken and truncated by the space bombardment, like monuments of some dead gigantic race.

They worked on without resting. Now and again, a clatter of auomatic fire told them that the guards were fighting some intruder. It was midnight when they reached the valves of the *Nova.* Roy Kellon came out, with an arm in a sling, to inspect the battered hull.

Kellon stood back in the shadows, too weary to call out. His breath came faster, and his throat ached suddenly. Roy looked lean and strong; those were his mother's eager gray eyes.

"Come aboard," he called. "I think she'll do. I've patched up the damage in the power room. We can make Venus for repairs and supplies—and then the stars!"

Kellon followed the shuffling line of weary men and women through the valve. Roy was standing in the light, inside. His lean face lit with astonished pleasure, and he put out his good hand.

"Why, father!" he whispered. "I'm so glad!"

"Good to see you, Roy." Kellon blinked and tried not to choke. "Now I understand what you tried to tell me once—about the importance of those other planets." He gulped, and hesitated. "But—I'm an old man, Roy. If . . . if you need the space for younger men and women—I'll stay."

"Nonsense, boss!" Roy gripped his hand. "Tickled. Just so we get away before the Preacher comes."

"Forget the *boss."* Kellon grinned and blinked again. "But we'll be loading supplies on Venus. You'll find that I'm a hell of a good foreman on a cargo gang."

The skirmishing guards retreated aboard. The valves were sealed. Anxiously, Roy cut in the *Nova's* untested drive. She lifted silently, swifter than any unitron vessel had ever been. The burning city slipped beneath its dark shroud of smoke. Ahead were the stars.

Although science and sanity were temporarily halted by the Preacher's world-wide revolution, Mankind avoided complete chaos and recovered its balance. A sensible peace was restored and with new initiative the people of Earth settled down to greater interplanetary exploration. In 2200 the first interstellar ship took off on a journey that was to mark a new progressive period and the beginning of a galactic empire.

DANCE OF A NEW WORLD

by John D. MacDonald

SHANE BRENT sat in the air-conditioned personnel office of the Solaray Plantations near Allada, Venus, and stared sleepily at the brown, powerful man across the table from him. Shane was an angular blond man, dressed in the pale-gray uniform of Space Control. On his left lapel was the interlocked C.A. of Central Assignment and on the right lapel was the small gold question mark of Investigation Section. Shane Brent had the faculty of complete relaxation, almost an animal stillness.

His hair was a cropped golden cap and his eyes a quiet gray. Below the edge of the gray shorts the hair, tight curled on his brown legs, had been burned white by the sun.

The man on the other side of the table was stocky, sullen and powerful. His face was livid with the seamed burns of space radiation before the days of adequate pilot protection. His name was Hiram Lee.

The conversation had lasted more than an hour and as yet Shane Brent was no closer to a solution. He had been carefully trained in all the arts of persuasion, of mental and emotional appeals. Hiram Lee had resisted them all.

Shane Brent said: "Lee, the whole thing is ridiculous. You're thirty-eight now. At least seven years of piloting ahead of you."

Lee snorted. "Piloting! Tell your boss that I'm unadjusted or something."

"Let's review the case again. You, at the age of eighteen, were the first third-generation space pilot in history. Your grandfather was John Lee who was an army pilot and who ran out of soup on the second swing around the Moon. As a memorial they left the little silver ship in orbit."

Lee's expression softened for the first time. "That's the way he would have wanted it."

"And your father, David Lee, was kicked off the spaceways for getting tight and balancing the old *Los Angeles* of the Donnovan Lines on its tail fifty feet in the air for ten minutes."

"And he won his bet of fifty bucks, junior. Don't forget that."

"And that brings us down to you, Hiram Lee. You made eighty-three trips with Space Combo in the VME triangle. Your education cost Central Assignment a lot of time and money. There aren't enough trained pilots who can stand the responsibility."

"The monotony, you mean." Lee stood up suddenly, his fists on his slim waist. "I told you before and I'll tell you again. When I started, it was a fine racket. You took off on manual controls and got your corrections en route from Central Astro. You made the corrections manually. You ripped off in those rusty buckets and the acceleration nearly tore your guts out. When I started we had a mean time of one five nine days from Earth to Venus. The trip was rugged. As a pilot you were somebody.

"Then some bright gent had to invent the Tapeworm. Central Astro plots your entire trip and sends the tape over. You co-ordinate the Tapeworm with takeoff time and feed in the tape. You've got a stand-by Tapeworm with a duplicate tape and you've got an escape tape which you feed in if anything goes too far off.

"The pilot sits there like a stuffed doll and the tape does everything. You don't even have to worry about meteorites. The Pusher obliques the little ones off and the Change-Scanner gives you an automatic course correction around the big one. It just got too dull, Brent. I'm not a guy who wants to play up to the rich passengers and tickle the babies under the chin and say kitcheekoo. I took three years of rocking chair circuits and then I quit. And I won't go back."

"What makes the job you've got so attractive, Lee? You're just a foreman and nursemaid to a bunch of Harids working in your herb patches."

Lee smiled tightly. "I keep 'em working and I tell 'em what to do and I try to keep them happy. You know the final psycho report on them. Their culture is much like the culture of ants on Earth—with one exception. They have a high degree of emotional instability. Did you ever see a Harid run berserk? A bunch of them are picking away and all of a sudden one will stop and start swaying his head from side to side. The others light out for far places. The one who has gone over the edge starts clicking those teeth of his. He lets out a scream that would split your head wide open and comes at you with his arms all coiled to strike. Bullets won't stop them. You haven't got time to mess with a powerpack and turn a ray on him. All you need is a knife. You just step inside the arms, slice his head clean off and get out of the way fast. See this scar? I didn't move fast enough six months ago."

Shane looked puzzled. "Then danger is an integral part of your pattern of living. Are you trying to tell me there's no danger in space?"

"It's a different kind, Brent. Once every few years a ship gets it. The people on it don't even know what happened. I like a little danger all the time."

"Would you consent to an alteration of glandular secretions to take away this yen for danger?"

"And start kissing babies again? Not a chance! Every Saturday I draw my pay and I hit all the joints along the Allada Strip. You meet some interesting people. All Sunday I have a head and a half. On Monday I'm out in the weeds again with my crew of Harids."

"Central Assignment isn't going to like my report on this."

Lee chuckled. "I sure weep for you pretty boys in gray. Tell them to mark my file closed and tell them where to file it for me, will you?"

Shane Brent stood up slowly, looking more than ever like a big sleepy animal. "Suppose, Lee, that you could take a route on one of the old ships? Manual controls, magnetic shoes, creaking plates—all the fixings."

Lee stared down at the table top for a few seconds. He said softly: "Nothing in this world would keep me out of space, brother. Nothing!"

Shane Brent asked: "And what if you had control of a modern job and had orders to take it so far that Central Astro couldn't give you a tape?"

Lee grinned. "That'd be O. K., too. I hate those smug characters sitting there in their ivory tower and supplying little strips of plastic to do the job that good pilots should be doing."

Shane Brent looked rueful. "Well, I guess you've licked me, Hiram. This will be the first time I've ever had to report back a complete failure."

"Do them good back there," Lee said, grinning. He stared curiously at Brent. "You know, Brent, you don't look like a guy who'd get much of a bang out of all this investigation junk. Why don't you take a break? I'll get you a gang of Harids. These Solaray people are O. K. to work for. Stick around. On Saturday we'll hit the Strip. There's a little gal dancing at Brownie's. A Seattle gal. Blonde. She won't even give me the right time, but you just might manage to—"

Brent grinned. "I better think that one over. Sorry to have taken so much of your time, Lee. See you around."

Shane Brent stood at the window and watched Hiram Lee walk off in the direction of the drying sheds. Already the thick heat had put a sheen of perspiration across the broad muscular shoulders of Lee. He walked with the carefree swing of an independent man of strength and courage. Shane Brent sighed, walked out into the heat and headed for the Solaray Communications Building.

He showed his credentials to the pretty clerk and said: "I'll need a private screen and a closed circuit and the usual guarantee of secrecy. It will be a charge to Central Assignment."

He went into the small room she had indicated, and opened the switch under the dead screen. A muted hum filled the room.

"Central Assignment," he said.

Thirty seconds later a clear feminine voice said: "Central Assignment."

"Brent calling. Give me Allison, please."

Allison's face suddenly filled the screen. He was a white-haired man with a florid face and an air of nervousness and vitality.

"Hello, Shane," he said quietly. "Closed circuit?"

"Of course, Frank. I've got a report on Hiram Lee."

"Good! Let's have it. I've got the recorder on."

"Here goes. Memorandum to F. A. Allison. From Shane Brent. Subject: Personnel for Project 81—Pilot Investigation. Case of Hiram Lee. Hiram Lee has been carefully investigated and it is recommended that permission be given the undersigned to approach Lee with an offer to join Project 81. Lee is alert, capable, strong, dependable to a sufficient degree. His training is excellent. He will need little indoctrination. Quinn is to be commended for recommending him to Central Assignment. It is believed that the probable seven-year duration of the trip will not discourage Lee. It is also believed that the calculated risk of one in four of returning from the Project flight will not deter Lee. Permission is requested to contact Lee and furthermore to sound him out on becoming a colonist, dependent, of course, on his finding a suitable woman to accompany him."

Allison, who had been listening with interest, said: "Good work! You have the authority you request."

"Have you got a line on the executive officer for Project 81 yet, Frank?"

Allison frowned. "Not yet, Shane. But something will turn up. Foster and Brady have filled most of the remaining slots. Denvers will go along as head physicist for the refinement of the drive brick for the return. Central Astro had given us the takeoff date as, let me see, ninety-three days from today."

"Pushing us, hey?"

"Can't be helped. It's either then or about three years from then. Say, Shane, instead of returning right away, see what you can find there in the line of an executive officer. Report if you get a line on anybody. Good-by, Shane."

"Good-by, Frank."

As the screen went blank, Shane sighed, cut the switch and walked out. At the front exit he went up the stairs to the platform, stepped into the waiting monorail suspension bus, found an empty seat. He felt drained and weary. Frank Allison was a difficult taskmaster. His personal affection for Allison made the job no easier.

At the scheduled time the bus slid smoothly away from Solaray, and braked to a stop in Allada seventy miles away in fifteen minutes. Shane Brent realized with a tight smile that it was the first time he had made any trip on Venus without paying any attention to the lush bluish-black vegetation below. The vegetation had standards of vitality and growth completely different from Earth vegetation. If the port city of Allada hadn't been originally constructed on a vitrified surface, thousands of laborers would have been required to slash the tendrils which would have grown each day. In fact, when the spot for Allada had been originally vitrified, it had only been done to a two-foot depth. Tendrils broke through on the third day, heaving and cracking the surface. After that experience, spaceships had hung, tail down, over the Allada site for ten days. When the molten rock had finally cooled, the experts had estimated that the black soil was vitrified to a depth of sixty feet. No plant life had broken through since that time. The electrified cables surrounding Allada constantly spit and crackled as the searching vine tips touched them.

Shane Brent went up to his room in Hostel B, shut the door wearily, listlessly pushed the News button under the wall screen and watched the news of the day with little interest as he slowly undressed. Crowds demonstrating in Asia-Block against the new nutrition laws. Project 80, two years out said to be nearing Planet K. Skirts once again to be midway between knee and hip next season. The first bachelor parenthood case comes up to decide whether a child born of the fertilization of a laboratory ovum can legally inherit. Brent frowned. Soon a clear definition of the legal rights of "Synthetics" would have to be made. He stopped suddenly as he had an idea. He decided to submit it to Frank. Why not get Inter-Federal Aid for a project to develop Synthetics to fill personnel requirements for future project flights? But would humanity agree to colonization by Synthetics? It still wasn't clearly understood whether or not they'd breed true.

He turned off the news, took a slow shower and dressed in fresh clothes. It was a nuisance changing the insignia. He wadded up the clothes he had removed and shoved them into the disposal chute.

At five o'clock he got on the call screen and got hold of the general manager at Allada. The man recognized him immediately. "What can I do for you, Brent?"

"As soon as Hiram Lee gets off duty, send him in to see me at Hostel B."

"I hope you don't steal him away from us, Brent. He's the best man we've got with the Harids. He doesn't scare easy."

Brent grinned. "I'll try to scare him away from me, sir."

He walked away from the screen, went into the shower room and examined the drinkmaster. It was one of the older type. No choice of brands. He set the master dial to one ounce. He pushed the gin button three times, the dry vermouth button once. He turned the stir lever and held it on for a few seconds before he turned it off. He looked in the side compartment and found no lemon, no olives, no pickled onions. That was the trouble with Central Assignment only approving the second-class places. He took the right size glass off the rack, put it under the spout and lifted it until the rim tripped the lever. The Martini poured smoothly into the glass, beading the outside of it with moisture. Down in the lobby the centralized accounting circuit buzzed and the price of the Martini was neatly stamped on his bill.

He walked back into the other room, sat in the deep chair and sipped the Martini, thinking it odd that with all the scientific experimentation in taste effects, no one had yet come up with any substitute for the delicacy and aroma of a dry Martini.

Hiram Lee arrived as he was sipping his third.

Twenty minutes later Hiram Lee stood at the windows, his lips compressed, pounding his fist into his palm in monotonous rhythm.

He turned suddenly. "I don't know what I'm waiting for, Shane. Yes! Count me in. When do we leave?"

"Hold up there, boy. You've got to go to school for a while. And how about the colonization angle. Will you want to stay?"

Lee grinned. "If I could talk that little Seattle blonde into going along, three years would be a short, short trip."

"Providing she could pass."

"Oh, sure. I think she'd pass. But she's too smart to tie up with me. Maybe. At least I'll give it a try. When have I got to tell you about whether or not I want to stay on this brand new world you boys have located?"

"Let me see. Ninety-three days from now is takeoff. Thirty days would be needed to approve and train a woman. You have sixty-three days to convince this blonde of yours that you're a very attractive guy. And then you'll have to talk her into taking a little three-year trip and settling down in the brush with you."

Lee looked at him curiously. "You knew all this early this afternoon and you gave me that song and dance with a straight face."

"That's my profession, Hiram."

"You're good at it, but I still have got an urge to bust you one."

"We'll arrange that some time. Right now I'm looking for recommendations for somebody to fill the slot of executive officer aboard the Project flight. Any ideas?"

Lee frowned. "None of those boys at Solaray will do. I can tell you that quick. They're either slowly congealing in their own juice or they're making too good a thing out of their job. Better hunt around in the other plantations. There's a guy named Mosey over at Factrigrown on the other side of Allada that has a good reputation."

"I'll take a look. And by the way, Hiram. All this is under the hat."

"*Natürlich, mein herr.* May I respectfully recommend that we embark on an evening of wine and song? I hold out little hope for the other ingredient."

One big meal and two hours later, Shane Brent and Hiram Lee walked into the club on the strip—the club called Brownie's.

The air was chilled, thinned and scented with the crispness of pine. The place was lighted by glowing amber disks set into the walls. It was packed with the usual type of crowd. Bug-eyed tourists trying to pretend that it was old stuff to them; hard-drinking, hard-fisted men from the plantations; neat, careful kids from the ship crews in Allada port; the odd-job drifters who had become parasites on the social structure of Allada; a big party of Allada politicos, wining and dining two inspectors from Asia-Block.

By luck they found an empty table for two not far from the dance floor. Hiram Lee was on hard liquor and Brent, feeling his limit near, had shifted to beer.

Lee said, slurring his words: "You're smart to get over onto beer, friend. You got to drink in this climate quite a while before you pick up a good head for the stuff." He glanced at his watch. "Floor show in ten minutes. Then you can see my blondie."

Shane Brent felt the artificial gaiety draining out of him. He looked around at the other tables, seeing suddenly the facial lines of viciousness and stupidity and greed. He remembered his reading of history and guessed that there must have been faces just like these in the early days of the American West. California in 1849 and 1850. Easy money attracted those who had been unable to make a proper adjustment to their accustomed environment. Actually it was the result of exploitation. The Harids, with their ant culture, had put up suicidal defense until General Brayton had discovered the wave length of the beamed thought waves which directed the Harids of each colony. Science had devised stronger sending devices than the colony waves and suddenly the Harids were servants.

Each foreman, such as Hiram Lee, carried one of the wave boxes and directed his crew. Central Economics had proven that the use of Harids in the culture—picking and drying of the herbs—was cheaper than any mechanical devices which could be set up.

Several couples danced to the music which came directly from New York. The oversize screen, a special three-dimensional job with good color values, covered most of the wall beyond the dance floor, showed a full orchestra. Brent guessed that when the floor show came on the management would either use live music or cut off the New York program and feed recordings into the screen.

The second guess proved right. The screen darkened and the couples left the floor. It brightened again, showing a canned vision of a small group completely equipped with electrical instruments. The M.C. walked out as the spot came on. He carried a small hand mike. After the initial fanfare, the music gave him a soft background and he said: "This show costs a lot of money to put on. All you folks drinking beer kindly turn your chairs around with your backs toward the floor. It is my pleasure to present a young lady who doesn't belong out here on Venus, wasting her time and talents on you space-burnt wanderers. On the other hand, Venus is a very appropriate spot for her to be. I give you Caren Ames and her famous Dance of a New World!" He grinned and backed out of the spot which widened until it covered most of the small dance floor.

The music shifted into a low, throbbing beat, an insistent jungle rhythm. Brent smiled cynically at the build-up, thought it was pretty fancy for what would probably turn out to be an aging stripper.

She backed slowly onto the floor, staring into the shadows from which she backed. Brent's breath caught in his throat. She was a faintly angular girl who should have had no grace. She wore a stylized version of the jungle clothes of the foremen on the plantations. Across her shoulder was slung a glittering replica of one of the thought boxes. She carried in her right hand a shining knife of silver.

She moved with such an intense representation of great fear that Brent felt the uneasy shifting of the crowd. The music was a frightened heartbeat. Her grace was angular, perfect and beautiful. Her face was a rigid mask of fear, her blond hair a frozen gout of gold that fell across one shoulder.

The throng gasped as the thing followed her into the middle of the floor, stood weaving, with its eyes on her. At first glance Brent thought that it was actually one of the Harids, but then he realized that it was a clever costume, worn by a rather small person. It had all the swaying obscenity of one of the tiny praying mantis of Earth. The swollen abdomen, the little triangular head, the knotted forearms held high—all of it covered with the fine soft gray scales of a Harid. The three digits of each hand waved aimlessly about like the antennae of a mammoth insect.

The expanding spot showed a small bush covered with the blue-black oily foliage of Venus. The girl stood her ground, lifted the thought box to her lips. She swayed slightly in rhythm with the Harid and her shoulders straightened as the Harid turned away from her, went over toward the bush. It began to pluck at the leaves with the perky, incredibly fast motions of the genuine Harid. Her dance of fear turned slowly into a dance of joy of release from fear. The tempo of the music increased and she danced ever closer to the squat form of the Harid, the knife in her hand cutting joyous sparkling arcs in the flood of tinted light.

She danced ever faster, and Brent said to Lee out of the corner of his mouth: "What is she doing here? She's wonderful!"

"I told you she was, boy."

A movement to Brent's right caught his eye. A bulky man from one of the plantations, very drunk, wavered on his chair as he watched the dance with slitted eyes. The lines around his mouth were taut. Brent felt wonder that the girl's artistry could have such an effect on one of the hardened foremen.

The music increased to a crescendo, and suddenly stopped. The girl stood motionless, her arms widespread. A very slow beat began. The Harid began to sway its head slowly from side to side in time with the beat. A woman in the darkness screamed softly. Head swaying, the Harid turned slowly and faced the girl. Her face once again became a face of fear. The knotted arms of the thing lifted high. The girl took a slow step backward. The tension was a physical thing—it could be felt in the utter silence of the audience.

At that moment the man whom Brent had noticed earlier roared, and jumped to his feet. There was a knife in his hand. He started for the mock Harid. Shane Brent left his chair in a quick smooth motion. His shoulder slammed against the thick thigh of the man with the knife and the two of them fell and slid across the polished floor. The room was in an uproar. The foreman bounded up, his drunken face twisted with rage. He drew the knife hand back to slash at Brent. Brent fell inside the thrust and struck the man a hammer blow across the side of his throat with the edge of his palm. The lights came on as the man dropped heavily onto his face. No one had thought of the music. It continued on. The mock Harid stood up and turned into a pale slight man who held the head portion of his costume in his hand. His pale lips trembled. He said, with great wonder: "That fellow would have cut my head off!"

The M.C. came out and said to the girl: "Want to try again from scratch, Miss Ames?"

Her eyes were still wide with shock. "No . . . I couldn't. Not right now. The next show maybe."

The M.C. turned to Brent. "Your check will be on the house, of course. The management is grateful."

The pale young man said: "I'm a little more grateful than the management."

"Thank you," Caren said simply.

Brent grinned at her. "You can return the favor by coming to our table after you change, Miss Ames. We're right over there."

She looked uncertain for a moment. "I don't usually—"

"Just this time, Miss Ames," the M.C. said.

Her smile was brilliant as she turned and left the floor. "See you in a few minutes Mr. ——."

"Brent. Shane Brent."

By that time the foreman was back on his feet, pale and shaking. He didn't understand what had happened. His friends led him back through the tables and out the door. He was protesting plaintively.

She sat quietly at the table between them and talked generalities in a quiet, cultured voice. Her between-acts dress was dark and conservative, her blond hair pulled back with determined severity.

She rebuffed the clumsy verbal advances of Hiram Lee very politely. By the time Shane Brent sat through the next show, enthralled anew by her artistry, Hiram Lee had his head on the table and was snoring softly.

During the dull act which followed Caren's, two heavily built men came over to the table and shook their heads sadly. "Poor ole Hiram! *Tch! Tch!* You mind, mister, if we lug ole Hiram back with us to Solaray. The poor boy needs a nice soft bunk."

Hiram protested feebly, but walked unsteadily between them, half supported by them as he left. Caren came back a few moments later.

They sat and talked of many things. At last she smiled and said: "I was silly when I was afraid to sit with you. Usually such things become a bit . . . messy."

He grinned. "I'm harmless. It does seem a little funny to me to find somebody like you in . . . this place."

Her eyes hardened. "I know how it goes from here on. Caren, you're too nice for a place like this. Let me take you away with me. I know the whole routine, Mr. Brent."

"It's not like that, Caren. Honestly. If I've asked a clumsy question, I'm sorry. It wasn't a buildup."

She looked into his eyes for long seconds. "All right, Shane. I believe you. I'll tell you how it happened. I was trained for ballet. When I was nineteen I married a very rich and very weak young man. After two years life became impossible. I managed to get a divorce. Every minute I spend on Earth is spent keeping out of his way. He manages to queer me in every dancing job I get. He has a weak heart. They won't accept him for space travel. I'm safe here. I can keep this job. But I can't ever go back."

She didn't ask for pity as she told him. It was as though she spoke of someone else.

"What kind of a career can you have here, Caren?"

She smiled and for once it wasn't a pretty smile. "I can make a living here. Some day there will be other cities beside Allada. Some day there will be a civilization on Venus which will be cultured enough so that my kind of career can exist here. But I won't live to see it."

"What do you want out of your life?" he asked gently.

"Peace. Freedom to do as I please." Her eyes were troubled.

"Is that all?" he asked insistently.

"No!" she flared. "I want more than that, but I don't know what I want. I'm just restless." She stopped and looked at him for long moments. "You are too, Shane. Aren't you?"

He tried to pass it off lightly. "Things have been a little dull lately."

"Take me for a walk through the city, Shane. When I feel like this I have to walk it off."

They walked to the edge of the wire near the constant sparking and crackling as the electricity crisped the searching tendrils. Above them the strange stars shone dimly through the constant heavy mist.

She stood with her head tilted back, her eyes half shut. On an impulse he reached out and unclasped the heavy pin that bound her hair so tightly. It fell in a shining flood over her shoulders.

"Why—" she said, startled.

"It just had to be. I feel like we've both been caught up in something outside of us and we're being hurtled along. Everything from here on will be because it has to be."

Without another word she came quickly into his arms. She was as intensely alive as during the intricate figures of her strange dance.

Once again the pretty clerk pointed out the small room to Shane Brent. He walked slowly, reluctantly, shut the door quietly behind him. In a short time he had a closed circuit to Central Assignment and moments later the alert face of Frank Allison filled the screen.

"What's the matter, Shane? You look done in. Rough night?"

"You could call it that I guess."

"How about Lee?"

"Everything is set, Frank. He'll leave on Flight Seven a week from today. Have somebody meet him and get him cleared and out to the school, will you?"

"Sure thing. What else have you got on your mind? From your tone that isn't all you called about."

"It isn't. I've got an exec for you, Frank."

"Good! A competent man?"

"I guess so. At least he's had the proper background for it."

"Don't keep me in suspense. Who is the man?"

"Me," Shane said flatly.

Frank Allison looked at him for long seconds, no trace of expression on his face. "Are you serious, Shane?"

"Completely, Frank."

Allison moved away from the screen. Shane waited impatiently. In a few moments Allison was back and Shane was mildly shocked to see that the man was smiling broadly. "I had a little detail to attend to, Shane. I had to collect ten bucks. You see, I had a bet with West. We had you picked for the job for the last seven months, but in order for you to qualify for it, the idea had to originate with you. If it didn't, Psycho wouldn't approve your arbitrary assignment to the spot. Congratulations!"

Shane Brent wanted to laugh as he realized Allison had been playing almost the same game with him that he had been playing with Hiram Lee.

"I won't be back, Frank," he said quietly.

Allison sobered. "I had hoped you would, Shane. It's your privilege to make your own choice. I had hoped that seven years from now, with your experience on this project, you'd be fitted to come in here and take my job."

"I'm sorry, Frank," Shane said.

Allison sighed. "So be it. When will you be in?"

"I'll wait until she can come with me. It'll be Flight Eight probably. I'll confirm."

There was deep affection in Allison's smile. "Whoever she is, boy, I'm sure that she's a very lovely person. See you when you get here."

The screen darkened. He stood for a moment and looked at its opaque dead grayness. He didn't see the screen. He saw, instead, a distant planet. He saw himself standing in a clearing, his hands hardened with pioneer labor. Above him was an alien sky. Beside him was a tall girl. Her hair of purest gold blew in the soft breeze.

Shane Brent turned and walked quickly from the small room. Caren would be waiting.

Kindred worlds established by Mother Earth were scattered throughout the universe by 4200. The home planet was proud of the far-flung colonies and the commerce of many alien places was immense. The Golden Age had swung to its peak. But, pendulum-like, there were signs that Earth, at the height of its glory, was facing another decisive crisis. Many heard the bell tolling the knell for the Empire, yet few recognized the tune.

MOTHER EARTH

by Isaac Asimov

"BUT CAN you be certain? Are you sure that even a professional historian can always distinguish between victory and defeat?"

Gustav Stein, who delivered himself of that mocking question with a whiskered smile and a gentle wipe at the gray mustache from the neighborhood of which he had just removed an empty glass, was not an historian. He was a physiologist.

But his companion *was* an historian, and he accepted the gentle thrust with a smile of his own.

Stein's apartment was, for Earth, quite luxurious. It lacked the empty privacy of the Outer Worlds, of course, since from its window there stretched outward a phenomenon that belonged only to the home planet—a city. A large city, full of people, rubbing shoulders, mingling sweat—

Nor was Stein's apartment fitted with its own power and its own utility supply. It lacked even the most elementary quota of positronic robots. In short, it lacked the dignity of self-sufficiency, and like all things on Earth, it was merely part of a community, a pendant unit of a cluster, a portion of a mob.

But Stein was an Earthman by birth and used to it. And after all, by Earth standards, the apartment was still luxurious.

It was just that looking outward through the same windows before which lay the city, one could see the stars and among them the

Outer Worlds, where there were no cities but only gardens; where the lawns were streaks of emerald, where all human beings were kings, and where all good Earthmen earnestly and vainly hoped to go some day.

Except for a few who knew better—like Gustav Stein.

The Friday evenings with Edward Field belonged to that class of ritual which comes with age and quiet life. It broke the week pleasantly for two elderly bachelors, and gave them an innocuous reason to linger over the sherry and the stars. It took them away from the crudities of life, and, most of all, it let them talk.

Field, especially, as a lecturer, scholar and man of modest means quoted chapter and verse from his still uncompleted history of Terrestrian Empire.

"I wait for the last act," he explained. "Then I can call it the 'Decline and Fall of Empire' and publish it."

"You must expect the last act to come soon, then."

"In a sense, it has come already. It is just that it is best to wait for all to recognize that fact. You see, there are three times when an Empire or an Economic System or a Social Institution falls, you skeptic—"

Field paused for effect and waited patiently for Stein to say, "And those times are?"

"First," Field ticked off a right forefinger, "there is the time when just a little nub shows up that points an inexorable way to finality. It can't be seen or recognized until the finality arrives, when the original nub becomes visible to hindsight."

"And you can tell what that little nub is?"

"I think so, since I already have the advantage of a century and a half of hindsight. It came when the Sirian sector colony, Aurora, first obtained permission of the Central Government at Earth to introduce positronic robots into their community life. Obviously, looking back at it, the road was clear for the development of a thoroughly mechanized society based upon robot labor and not human labor. And it is this mechanization that has been and will yet be the deciding factor in the struggle between the Outer Worlds and Earth."

"It is?" murmured the physiologist. "How infernally clever you historians are. What and where is the second time the Empire fell?"

"The second point in time," and Field gently bent his right middle finger backward, "arrives when a signpost is raised for the expert so large and plain that it can be seen even without the aid of perspective. And that point has been passed, too, with the first establishment of an immigration quota against Earth by the Outer Worlds. The fact that Earth found itself unable to prevent an action so obviously detrimental to itself was a shout for all to hear, and that was fifty years ago."

"Better and better. And the third point?"

"The third point?" Down went the ring finger. "That is the least important. That is when the signpost becomes a wall with a huge 'The End' scrawled upon it. The only requirement for knowing that the end has come then is neither perspective nor training, but merely the ability to listen to the video."

"I take it that the third point in time has not yet come."

"Obviously not, or you would not need to ask. Yet it may come soon, for instance, if there is war."

"Do you think there will be?"

Field avoided commitment. "Times are unsettled, and a good deal of futile emotion is sweeping Earth on the immigration question. And if there should be a war, Earth would be defeated quickly and lastingly, and the wall would be erected."

"Can you be certain? Are you sure that even a professional historian can always distinguish between victory and defeat?"

Field smiled. He said: "You may know something I do not. For instance, they talk about something called the 'Pacific Project.' "

"I never heard of it." Stein refilled the two glasses, "Let us speak of other things."

He held up his glass to the broad window so that the far stars flickered rosily in the clear liquid and said: "To a happy ending to Earth's troubles."

Field held up his own, "To the Pacific Project."

Stein sipped gently and said: "But we drink to two different things."

"Do we?"

It is quite difficult to describe any of the Outer Worlds to a native Earthman, since it is not so much a description of a world that is required as a description of a state of mind. The Outer Worlds—some fifty of them, orginally colonies, later dominions, later nations—differ extremely among themselves in a physical sense. But the state of mind is somewhat the same throughout.

It is something that grows out of a world not originally congenial to mankind, yet populated by the cream of the difficult, the different, the daring, the deviant.

If it is to be expressed in a word, that word is "individuality."

There is the world of Aurora, for instance, three parsecs from Earth. It was the first planet settled outside the Solar System, and represented the dawn of interstellar travel. Hence its name.

It had air and water to start with, perhaps, but on Earthly standards, it was rocky and infertile. The plant life that did exist, sustained by a yellow-green pigment completely unrelated to chlorophyll, and not as efficient, gave the comparatively fertile regions a decidedly bilious and unpleasant appearance to unaccustomed eyes. No animal life higher than unicellular, and the equivalent of bacteria, as well, were present. Nothing dangerous naturally, since the two biological systems, of Earth and Aurora, were chemically unrelated.

Aurora became, quite gradually, a patchwork. Grains and fruit trees came first; shrubs, flowers, and grass afterward. Herds of livestock followed. And, as if it were necessary to prevent too close a copy of the mother planet, positronic robots also came to build the mansions, carve the landscapes, lay the power units. In short, to do the work, and turn the planet green and human.

There was the luxury of a new world and unlimited mineral resources. There was the splendid excess of atomic power laid out on new foundations with merely thousands, not billions, to service. There was the vast flowering of physical science, in worlds where there was room for it.

Take the home of Franklin Maynard, for instance, who, with his wife, three children, and twenty-seven robots lived on an estate more than forty miles away, in distance, from the nearest neighbor. Yet by community-wave he could, if he wished, share the living room of any of the seventy-five million on Aurora—with each singly; with all simultaneously.

Maynard knew every inch of his valley. He knew just where it ended, sharply, and gave way to the alien crags, along whose undesirable slopes the angular, sharp leaves of the native furze clung sullenly—as if in hatred of the softer matter that had usurped its place in the sun.

Maynard did not have to leave that valley. He was a deputy in the Gathering, and a member of the Foreign Agents Committee, but he could transact all business, but the most extremely essential, by community-wave, without ever sacrificing that precious privacy he had to have in a way no Earthman could understand.

Even the present business could be performed by community-wave. The man, for instance, who sat with him in his living room, was Charles Hijkman, and he, actually, was sitting in his own living room on an island in an artificial lake stocked with fifty varieties of fish, which happened to be twenty-five hundred miles distant, in space.

The connection was an illusion, of course. If Maynard were to reach out a hand, he could feel the invisible wall.

Even the robots were quite accustomed to the paradox, and when Hijkman raised a hand for a cigarette, Maynard's robot made no move to satisfy the desire, though a half-minute passed before Hijkman's own robot could do so.

The two men spoke like Outer Worlders, that is, stiffly and in syllables too clipped to be friendly, and yet certainly not hostile. Merely undefinably lacking in the cream—however sour and thin at times—of human sociability which is so forced upon the inhabitants of Earth's ant heaps.

Maynard said: "I have long wanted a private communion, Hijkman. My duties in the Gathering, this year—"

"Quite. That is understood. You are welcome now, of course. In fact, especially so, since I have heard of the superior nature of your grounds and landscaping. Is it true that your cattle are fed on imported grass?"

"I'm afraid that is a slight exaggeration. Actually, certain of my best milkers feed on Terrestrial imports during calving time, but such a procedure would be prohibitively expensive, I'm afraid, if made general. It yields quite extraordinary milk, however. May I have the privilege of sending you a day's output?"

"It would be most kind of you." Hijkman bent his head, gravely. "You must receive some of my salmon in return."

To a Terrestrial eye, the two men might have appeared much alike. Both were tall, though not unusually so for Aurora, where the average height of the adult male is six feet one and one half inches. Both were blond and hard-muscled, with sharp and pronounced features. Though neither was younger than forty, middle-age as yet sat lightly upon them.

So much for amenities. Without a change in tone, Maynard proceeded to the serious purpose of his call.

He said: "The Committee, you know, is now largely engaged with

Moreanu and his Conservatives. We would like to deal with them firmly, we of the Independents, that is. But before we can do so with the requisite calm and certainty, I would like to ask you certain questions."

"Why me?"

"Because you are Aurora's most important physicist."

Modesty is an unnatural attitude, and one which is only with difficulty taught to children. In an individualistic society it is useless and Hijkman was, therefore, unencumbered with it. He simply nodded objectively at Maynard's last words.

"And," continued Maynard, "as one of us. You are an Independent."

"I am a member of the Party. Dues-paying, but not very active."

"Nevertheless safe. Now, tell me, have you heard of the Pacific Project?"

"The Pacific Project?" There was a polite inquiry in his words.

"It is something which is taking place on Earth. The Pacific is a Terrestrial ocean, but the name itself probably has no significance."

"I have never heard of it."

"I am not surprised. Few have, even on Earth. Our communion, by the way, is via tight-beam and nothing must go further."

"I understand."

"Whatever Pacific Project is—and our agents are extremely vague—it might conceivably be a menace. Many of those who on Earth pass for scientists seem to be connected with it. Also, some of Earth's more radical and foolish politicians."

"Hm-m-m. There was once something called the Manhattan Project—"

"Yes," urged Maynard, "what about it?"

"Oh, it's an ancient thing. It merely occurred to me because of the analogy in names. The Manhattan Project was before the time of extra-terrestrial travel. Some petty war in the dark ages occurred, and it was the name given to a group of scientists who developed atomic power."

"Ah," Maynard's hand became a fist, "and what do you think the Pacific Project can do then?"

Hijkman considered. Then, softly: "Do you think Earth is planning war?"

On Maynard's face there was a sudden expression of distaste. "Six billion people. Six billion half-apes rather jammed into one system to a near-explosion point, facing only two hundred million of us, total. Don't you think it is a dangerous situation."

"Oh, numbers!"

"All right. Are we safe despite the numbers? Tell me. I'm only an administrator, and you're a physicist. *Can* Earth win a war in any way?"

Hijkman sat solemnly in his chair and thought carefully and slowly. Then he said: "Let us reason. There are three broad classes of methods whereby an individual or group can gain his ends against opposition. On an increasing level of subtlety, those three classes can be termed the physical, the biological, and the psychological.

"Now the physical can be easily eliminated. Earth does not have an industrial background. It does not have a technical know-how. It has very limited resources. It lacks even a single outstanding physical scientist. So it is as impossible as anything in the Galaxy can be that they can develop any form of physico-chemical application that is not already known to the Outer Worlds. Provided, of course, that the conditions of the problem imply single-handed opposition on the part of Earth against any or all of the Outer Worlds. I take it that none of the Outer Worlds intends leaguing with Earth against us."

Maynard indicated violent opposition even to the suggestion, "No, no, no. There is no question of that. Put it out of your mind."

"Then ordinary physical surprise weapons are inconceivable. It is useless to discuss it further."

"Then what about your second class, the biological."

Slowly, Hijkman lifted his eyebrows: "Now that is less certain. Some Terrestrial biologists are quite competent, I am told. Naturally, since I am myself a physicist, I am not entirely qualified to judge this. Yet I believe that in certain restricted fields, they are still expert. In agricultural science, of course, to give an obvious example. And in bacteriology. Um-m-m—"

"Yes, what about bacteriological warfare."

"A thought! But no, no, quite inconceivable. A teeming constricted world such as Earth cannot afford to fight an open latticework of fifty sparse worlds with germs. They are infinitely more subject to epidemics, that is, to retaliation in kind. In fact, I would say that given our living conditions here on Aurora and on the other Outer Worlds, no contagious disease could really take hold. No, Maynard. You can check with a bacteriologist, but I think he'll tell you the same."

Maynard said: "And the third class?"

"The psychological? Now that is unpredictable. And yet the Outer Worlds are intelligent and healthy communities and not amenable to ordinary propaganda, or for that matter to any form of unhealthy emotionalism. Now, I wonder—"

"Yes?"

"What if the Pacific Project is just that. I mean, a huge device to keep us off balance. Something top-secret, but meant to leak out in just the right fashion, so that the Outer Worlds yield a little to Earth, simply in order to play safe."

There was a longish silence.

"Impossible," burst out Maynard, angrily.

"*You* react properly. *You* hesitate. But I don't seriously press the interpretation. It is merely a thought."

A longer silence, then Hijkman spoke again: "Are there any other questions?"

Maynard started out of a reverie, "No . . . no—"

The wave broke off and a wall appeared where space had been a moment before.

Slowly, with stubborn disbelief, Franklin Maynard shook his head.

Ernest Keilin mounted the stairs with a feeling for all the past centuries. The building was old, cobwebbed with history. It once housed the Parliament of Man, and from it words went out that clanged throughout the stars.

It was a tall building. It soared—stretched—strained. Out and up to the stars, it reached; to the stars that had now turned away.

It no longer even housed the Parliament of Earth. That had now been switched to a newer, neoclassical building, one that imperfectly aped the architectural stylisms of the ancient pre-Atomic age.

Yet the older building still held its great name. Officially, it was still Stellar House, but it only housed the functionaries of a shriveled bureaucracy now.

Keilin got out at the twelfth floor, and the lift dropped quickly down behind him. The radiant sign said smoothly and quietly: Bureau of Information. He handed a letter to the receptionist. He waited. And eventually, he passed through the door which said, "L. Z. Cellioni—Secretary of Information."

Cellioni was little and dark. His hair was thick and black; his mustache thin and black. His teeth, when he smiled, were startlingly white and even—so he smiled often.

He was smiling now, as he rose and held out his hand. Keilin took it, then an offered seat, then an offered cigar.

Cellioni said: "I am very happy to see you, Mr. Keilin. It is kind of you to fly here from New York on such short notice."

Keilin curved the corners of his lips down and made a tiny gesture with one hand, deprecating the whole business.

"And now," continued Cellioni, "I presume you would like an explanation of all this."

"I wouldn't refuse one," said Keilin.

"Unfortunately, it is difficult to know exactly how to explain. As Secretary of Information, my position is difficult. I must safeguard the security and well-being of Earth and, at the same time, observe our traditional freedom of the press. Naturally, and fortunately, we have no censorship, but just as naturally, there are times when we could almost wish we did have."

"Is this," asked Keilin, "with reference to me? About censorship, I mean?"

Cellioni did not answer directly. Instead, he smiled again, slowly, and with a remarkable absence of joviality.

He said: "You, Mr. Keilin, have one of the most widely heard and influential talecats on the video. Therefore, you are of peculiar interest to the government."

"The time is mine," said Keilin, stubbornly. "I pay for it. I pay taxes on the income I derive from it. I adhere to all the common-law rulings on taboos. So I don't quite see of what interest I can be to the government."

"Oh, you misunderstand me. It's my fault, I suppose, for not being clearer. You have committed no crime; broken no laws. I have only admiration for your journalistic ability. What I refer to is your editorial attitude at times."

"With respect to what?"

"With respect," said Cellioni, with a sudden harshness about his thin lips, "to our policy toward the Outer Worlds."

"My editorial attitude represents what I feel and think, Mr. Secretary."

"I allow this. You have your right to your feelings and your thoughts. Yet it is injudicious to spread them about nightly to an audience of half a billion."

"Injudicious, according to you, perhaps. But legal, according to anybody."

"It is sometimes necessary to place good of country above a strict and selfish interpretation of legality."

Keilin tapped his foot twice and frowned blackly.

"Look," he said, "put this frankly. What is it you want?"

The Secretary of Information spread his hands out before him. "In a word—co-operation! Really, Mr. Keilin, we can't have you weakening the will of the people. Do you appreciate the position of Earth? Six billions, and a declining food supply! It is insupportable! And emigration is the only solution. No patriotic Earthman can fail to see the justice of our position. No reasonable human being anywhere can fail to see the justice of it."

Keilin said: "I agree with your premise that the population problem is serious, but emigration is not the only solution. In fact, emigration is the one sure way of hastening destruction.

"Really? And why do you say that?"

"Because the Outer Worlds will not permit emigration, and you can force their hand by war only. *And we cannot win a war.*"

"Tell me," said Cellioni softly, "have *you* ever tried emigrating. It seems to me you could qualify. You are quite tall, rather light-haired, intelligent—"

The video-man flushed. He said, curtly: "I have hay fever."

"Well," and the secretary smiled, "then you must have good reason for disapproving their arbitrary genetic and racist policies."

Keilin replied with heat: "I won't be influenced by personal motives. I would disapprove their policies, if I qualified perfectly for emigration. But my disapproval would alter nothing. Their policies *are* their policies, and they can enforce them. Moreover, their policies have some reason even if wrong. Mankind is starting again on the Outer Worlds, and they—the ones who got there first—would like to eliminate some of the flaws of the human mechanism that have become obvious with time. A hay fever sufferer *is* a bad egg—genetically. A cancer prone even more so. Their prejudices against skin and hair colors are, of course, senseless, but I can grant that they are interested in uniformity and homogeneity. And as for Earth, we can do much even without the help of the Outer Worlds."

"For instance, what?"

"Positronic robots and hydroponic farming should be introduced, and—most of all—birth control must be instituted. An intelligent birth control, that is, based on firm psychiatric principles intended to eliminate the psychotic trends, congenital infirmities—"

"As they do in the Outer Worlds—"

"Not at all. I have mentioned no racist principles. I talk only of mental and physical infirmities that are held in common by all ethnic and racial groups. And most of all, births must be held below deaths until a healthful equilibrium is reached."

Cellioni said, grimly: "We lack the industrial techniques and the resources to introduce a robot-hydroponic technology in anything less than five centuries. Furthermore, the traditions of Earth, as well as current ethical beliefs forbid robot labor and false foods. Most of all, they forbid the slaughter of unborn children. Now come, Keilin, we can't have you pouring this out over video. It won't work; it distracts the attention; it weakens the will."

Keilin broke in, impatiently: "Mr. Secretary, do you want war?"

"Do I *want* war? That is an impudent question."

"Then who are the policy-makers in the government who *do* want war? For instance, who is responsible for the calculated rumor of the Pacific Project."

"The Pacific Project? And where did you hear of that?"

"My sources are my secret."

"Then I'll tell you. You heard of this Pacific Project from Moreanu of Aurora on his recent trip to Earth. We know more about you than you suppose, Mr. Keilin."

"I believe that, but I do not admit that I received information from Moreanu. Why do you think I could get information from him? Is it because he was deliberately allowed to learn of this piece of trumpery."

"Trumpery?"

"Yes. I think Pacific Project is a fake. A fake meant to inspire confidence. I think that the government plans to let the so-called secret leak out in order to strengthen its war policy. It is part of a war of nerves on Earth's own people, and it will be the ruin of Earth in the end.

"And I will take this theory of mine to the people."

"You will not, Mr. Keilin," said Cellioni, quietly.

"I will."

"Mr. Keilin, your friend, Ion Moreanu is having his troubles on Aurora, perhaps for being too friendly with you. Take care that you do not have equal trouble for being too friendly with him."

"I'm not worried." The video man laughed shortly, lunged to his feet and strode to the door.

Keilin smiled very gently when he found the door blocked by two large men: "You mean I am under arrest right now."

"Exactly," said Cellioni.

"On what charge?"

"We'll think of some later."

Keilin left—under escort.

On Aurora, the mirror image of the afore-described events was taking place, and on a larger scale.

The Foreign Agents Committee of the Gathering had been meeting now for days—ever since the session of the Gathering in which Ion Moreanu and his Conservative Party made their great bid to force a vote of no confidence. That it had failed was in part due to the superior political generalship of the Independents, and in some part due to the activity of this same Foreign Agents Committee.

For months now the evidence had been accumulating, and when the vote of confidence turned out to be sizably in favor of the Independents, the Committee was able to strike in its own way.

Moreanu was subpoenaed in his own home, and placed under house arrest. Although this procedure of house arrest was not, under the circumtances, legal—a fact emphatically pointed out by Moreanu—it was nevertheless successfully accomplished.

For three days Moreanu was cross-examined thoroughly, in polite, even tones that scarcely ever veered from unemotional curiosity. The seven inquisitors of the Committee took turns in questioning, but Moreanu had respite only for ten-minute intervals during the hours in which the Committee sat.

After three days, he showed the effects. He was hoarse with demanding that he be faced with his accusers; weary with insisting that he be informed of the exact nature of the charges; throat-broken with shouting against the illegality of the procedure.

The Committee finally read statements at him—

"Is this true or not? Is this true or not?"

Moreanu could merely shake his head wearily as the structure spidered about him.

He challenged the competency of the evidence and was smoothly informed that the proceedings constituted a Committee Investigation and not a trial—

The chairman clapped his gavel finally. He was a broad man of tremendous purpose. He spoke for an hour in his final summing up of the results of the inquiry, but only a relatively short portion of it need be quoted.

He said: "If you had merely conspired with others on Aurora, we could understand you; even forgive you. Such a fault would have been held in common with many ambitious men in history. It is not that at all. What horrifies us and removes all pity is your eagerness to consort with the disease-ridden, ignorant and subhuman remnants of Earth.

"You, the accused, stand here under a heavy weight of evidence showing you to have conspired with the worst elements of Earth's mongrel population—"

The chairman was interrupted by an agonized cry from Moreanu, "But the motive! What motive can you possibly attribute—"

The accused was pulled back into his seat. The chairman pursed his lips and departed from the slow gravity of his prepared speech to improvise a bit.

"It is not," he said, "for this Committee to go into your motives. We have shown the facts of the case. The Committee *does* have evidence—" He paused, and looked along the line of the members to the right and the left, then continued. "I think I may say that the Committee has evidence that points to your intentions to use Earth man power to engineer a coup that would leave you dictator over Aurora. But since the evidence has not been used, I will not go further into that, except to say that such a consummation is not inconsistent with your characters displayed at these hearings."

He went back to his speech. "Those of us who sit here have heard, I think, of something termed the 'Pacific Project,' which, according to rumors, represents an attempt on the part of Earth to retrieve its lost dominions.

"It is needless to emphasize here that any such attempt must be doomed to failure. And yet defeat for us is not entirely inconceivable. One thing can cause us to stumble, and that one thing is an unsuspected internal weakess. Genetics is, after all, still an imperfect science. Even with twenty generations behind us, undesirable traits may crop up at scattered points, and each reresents a flaw in the steel shield of Aurora's strength.

"*That* is the Pacific Project—the use of our own criminals and traitors against us; and if they can find such in our inner councils, the Earthmen might even succeed.

"The Foreign Agents Committee exits to combat that threat. In the accused, we touch the fringes of the web. We must go on—"

The speech did, at any rate.

When it was concluded, Moreanu, pale, wild-eyed, pounded his fist, "I demand my say—"

"The accused may speak," said the chairman.

Moreanu rose and looked about him for a long moment. The room, fitted for an audience of seventy-five million by Community Wave, was unattended. There were the inquisitors, legal staff, official recorders— And with him, in the actual flesh, his guards.

He would have done better with an audience. To whom could he otherwise appeal? His glance fled hopelessly from each face it touched, but could find nothing better.

"First," he said, "I deny the legality of this meeting. My constitutional rights of privacy and individuality have been denied. I have been tried by a group without standing as a court, by individuals convinced, in advance, of my guilt. I have been denied adequate opportunity to defend myself. In fact, I have been treated throughout as an already convicted criminal requiring only sentence.

"I deny, completely and without reservation, that I have been engaged in any activity detrimental to the state or tending to subvert any of its fundamental institutions.

"I accuse, vigorously and unreservedly, this Committee of deliberately using its powers to win political battles. I am guilty not of treason, but of disagreement. I disagree with a policy dedicated to the destruction of the larger part of the human race for reasons that are trivial and inhumane.

"Rather than destruction, we owe assistance to these men who are condemned to a harsh, unhappy life solely because it was our ancestors and not theirs who happened to reach the Outer Worlds first. With our technology and resources, they can yet re-create and redevelop—"

The chairman's voice rose above the intense near-whisper of Moreanu: "You are out of order. The Committee is quite prepared to hear any remarks you make in your own defense, but a sermon on the rights of Earthmen is outside the legitimate realm of the discussion."

The hearings were formally closed. It was a great political victory for the Independents; all would agree to that. Of the members of the Committee, only Franklin Maynard was not completely satisfied. A small nagging doubt remained.

He wondered—

Should he try one last time? Should he speak once more and then no more to that queer little monkey ambassador from Earth? He made his decision quickly and acted upon it instantly. Only a pause to arrange a witness, since even for himself an unwitnessed private communion with an Earthman might be dangerous.

Luiz Moreno, Ambassador to Aurora from Earth, was, to put not too fine a point on it, a miserable figure of a man. And that wasn't exactly an accident. On the whole, the foreign diplomats of Earth tended to be dark, short, wizen, or weakly—or all four.

That was only self-protection since the Outer Worlds exerted strong attraction for any Earthman. Diplomats exposed to the allure of Aurora, for instance, could not but be exceedingly reluctant to return to Earth. Worse, and more dangerous, exposure meant a growing sympathy with the demigods of the stars and a growing alienation from the slum-dwellers of Earth.

Unless, of course, the ambassador found himself rejected. Unless, he found himself somewhat despised. And then, no more faithful servant of Earth could be imagined, no man less subject to corruption.

The Ambassador to Earth was only five foot two, with a bald head and receding forehead, a pinkish affectation of beard and red-rimmed eyes. He was suffering from a slight cold, the occasional results whereof he smothered in a handkerchief. And yet, withal, he was a man of intellect.

To Franklin Maynard, the sight and sound of the Earthman was distressing. He grew queasy at each cough and shuddered when the ambassador wiped his nose.

Maynard said: "Your excellency, we commune at my request because I wish to inform you that the Gathering has decided to ask your recall by your government."

"That is kind of you, councilor. I had an inkling of this. And for what reason?"

"The reason is not within the bounds of discussion. I believe it is the prerogative of a sovereign state to decide for itself whether a foreign representative shall be *persona grata* or not. Nor do I think you really need enlightenment on this matter."

"Very well, then." The ambassador paused to wield his handkerchief and murmur an apology. "Is that all?"

Maynard said: "Not quite. There are matters I would like to mention. Remain!"

The ambassador's reddened nostrils flared a bit, but he smiled, and said: "An honor."

"Your world, excellency," said Maynard, superciliously, "displays a certain belligerence of late that we on Aurora find most annoying and unnecessary. I trust that you will find your return to Earth at this point a convenient opportunity to use your influence against further displays such as recently occurred in New York where two Aurorans were manhandled by a mob. The payment of an indemnity may not be enough the next time."

"But that is emotional overflow, Councilor Maynard. Surely, you cannot consider youngsters shouting in the streets to be adequate representations of belligerence."

"It is backed by your government's actions in many ways. The recent arrest of Mr. Ernest Keilin, for instance."

"Which is a purely domestic affair," said the ambassador, quietly.

"But not one to demonstrate a reasonable spirit toward the Outer Worlds. Keilin was one of the few Earthmen who until recently could yet make their voices heard. He was intelligent enough to realize that no divine right protects the inferior man simply because he is inferior."

The ambassador arose: "I am not interested in Auroran theories on racial differences."

"A moment. Your government may realize that much of their plans have gone awry with the arrest of your agent, Moreanu. Stress the fact that we of Aurora are much wiser than we have been prior to this arrest. It may serve to give them pause."

"Is Moreanu *my* agent? Really, councilor, if I am disaccredited, I shall leave. But surely the loss of diplomatic immunity does not affect my personal immunity as an honest man from charges of espionage."

"Isn't that your job?"

"Do Aurorans take it for granted that espionage and diplomacy are identical? My government will be glad to hear it. We shall take appropriate precautions."

"Then you defend Moreanu? You deny that he has been working for Earth."

"I defend only myself. As to Moreanu, I am not stupid enough to say anything."

"Why stupid?"

"Wouldn't a defense by myself be but another indictment against him? I neither accuse nor defend him. Your government's quarrel with Moreanu, like my government's with Keilin—whom you, by the way, are most suspiciously eager to defend—is an internal affair. I will leave now."

The communion broke, and almost instantly the wall faded again. Hijkman was looking thoughtfully at Maynard.

"What do you think of him?" asked Maynard, grimly.

"Disgraceful that such a travesty of humanity should walk Aurora, I think."

"I agree with you, and yet . . . and yet—"

"Well?"

"And yet I can almost find myself able to think that he is the master and that we dance to his piping. You know of Moreanu?"

"Of course."

"Well, he will be convicted; sent to an asteroid. His party will be broken. Offhand, anyone would say that such actions represent a horrible defeat for Earth."

"Is there doubt in your mind that such is the case?"

"I'm not sure. Committee Chairman Hond insisted on airing his theory that Pacific Project was the name Earth gave to a device for using internal traitors on the Outer Worlds. But I don't think so. I'm not sure the facts fit that. For instance, where did we get our evidence against Moreanu?"

"I certainly can't say."

"Our agents, in the first place. But how did they get it? The evidence was a little *too* convincing. Moreanu could have guarded himself better—"

Maynard hesitated. He seemed to be attempting a blush, and failing. "Well, to put it quickly, I think it was the Terrestrian Ambassador who somehow presented us with the most evidence. I think that he played on Moreanu's sympathy for Earth first to befriend him and then to betray him."

"Why?"

"I don't know. To insure war, perhaps—with this Pacific Project waiting for us."

"I don't believe it."

"I know. I have no proof. Nothing but suspicion. The Committee wouldn't believe me either. It seemed to me, perhaps, that a last talk with the ambassador might reveal something, but his mere appearance antagonizes me, and I find I spend most of my time trying to remove him from my sight."

"Well, you are becoming emotional, my friend. It is a disgusting weakness. I hear that you have been appointed a delegate to the Interplanetary Gathering at Hesperus. I congratulate you."

"Thanks," said Maynard, absently.

Luiz Moreno, ex-Ambassador to Aurora, had been glad to return to Earth. He was away from the artificial landscapes that seemed to have no life of their own, but to exist only by virtue of the strong will of their possessors. Away from the too-beautiful men and women and from their ubiquitous, brooding robots.

He was back to the hum of life and the shuffle of feet; the brushing of shoulders and the feeling of breath in the face.

Not that he was able to enjoy these sensations entirely. The first days had been spent in lively conferences with the heads of Earth's government.

In fact, it was not till nearly a week had passed, that an hour came in which he could consider himself truly relaxed.

He was in the rarest of all appurtenances of Terrestrial Luxury—a roof garden. With him was Gustav Stein, the quite obscure physiologist, who was, nevertheless, one of the prime movers of the Plan, known to rumor as the Pacific Project.

"The confirmatory tests," said Moreno, with an almost dreadful satisfaction, "all check so far, do they not?"

"So far. *Only* so far. We have miles to go."

"Yet they will continue to go well. To one who has lived on Aurora for nearly a year as I have, there can be no doubt but that we're on the right track."

"Um-m-m. Nevertheless, I will go only by the laboratory reports."

"And quite rightly." His little body was almost stiff with gloating. "Some day, it will be different. Stein, you have not met these men, these Outer Worlders. You may have come across the tourists, perhaps, in their special hotels, or riding through the streets in inclosed cars, equipped with the purest of private, air-conditioned atmospheres for their well-bred nostrils; observing the sights through a movable periscope and shuddering away from the touch of an Earthman.

"But you have not met them on their own world, secure in their own sickly, rotting greatness. Go, Stein, and be despised a while. Go, and find how well you can compete with their own trained lawns as something to be gently trod upon.

"And yet, when I pulled the proper cords, Ion Moreanu fell—Ion Moreanu, the only man among them with the capacity to understand the workings of another's mind. It is the crisis that we have passed now. We front a smooth path now."

Satisfaction! Satisfaction!

"As for Keilin," he said suddenly, more to himself than to Stein, "he can be turned loose, now. There's little he can say, hereafter, that can endanger anything. In fact, I have an idea. The Interplanetary Conference opens on Hesperus within the month. He can be sent to report the meeting. It will be an earnest of our friendliness—and keep him away for the summer. I think it can be arranged."

It was.

Of all the Outer Worlds, Hesperus was the smallest, the latest settled, the furthest from Earth. Hence the name. In a physical sense, it was not best suited to a great diplomatic gathering, since its facilities were small. For instance, the available community-wave network could not possibly be stretched to cover all the delegates, secretarial staff, and administrators necessary in a convocation of fifty planets. So meetings in person were arranged in buildings impressed for the purpose.

Yet there was a symbolism in the choice of meeing place that escaped practically nobody. Hesperus, of all the Worlds, was furthest removed from Earth. But the spatial distance—one hundred parsecs or more—was the least of it. The important point was that Hesperus had been colonized not by Earthmen, but by men from the Outer World of Faunus.

It was therefore of the second generation, and so it had no "Mother Earth." Earth to it was but a vague grandmother, lost in the stars.

As is usual in all such gatherings, little work is actually done on the session floors. That space is reserved for the official soundings of whatever is primarily intended for home ears. The actual swapping and horse-trading takes place in the lobbies and at the lunch-tables and many an irresolvable conflict has softened over the soup and vanished over the nuts.

And yet particular difficulties were present in this particular case. Not in all worlds was the community-wave as paramount and all-pervading as it was on Aurora, but it was prominent in all. It was, therefore, with a certain sense of outrage and loss that the tall, dignified men found it necessary to approach one another in the flesh, without the comforting privacy of the invisible wall between, without the warm knowledge of the breakswitch at their fingertrips.

They faced one another in uneasy semi-embarrassment and tried not to watch one another eat; tried not to shrink at the unmeant touch. Even robot service was rationed.

Ernest Keilin, the only accredited video-representative from Earth, was aware of some of these matters only in the vague way they are described here. A more precise insight he could not have. Nor could anyone brought up in a society where human beings exist only in the plural, and where a house need only be deserted to be feared.

So it was that certain of the most subtle tensions escaped him at the formal dinner party given by the Hesperian government during the third week of the conference. Other tensions, however, did not pass him by.

The gathering after the dinner naturally fell apart into little groups. Keilin joined the one that contained Franklin Maynard of Aurora. As the delegate of the largest of the Worlds, he was naturally the most newsworthy.

Maynard was speaking casually between sips at the tawny Hesperian cocktail in his hand. If his flesh crawled slightly at the closeness of the others, he masked the feeling masterfully.

"Earth," he said, "is, in essence, helpless against us if we avoid unpredictable military adventures. Economic unity is actually a necessity, if we intend to avoid such adventures. Let Earth realize to how great an extent her economy depends upon us, on the things that we alone can supply her, and there will be no more talk of living space. And if we are united, Earth would never dare attack. She will exchange her barren longings for atomic motors—or not, as she pleases."

And he turned to regard Keilin with a certain hauteur as the other found himself stung to comment:

"But your manufactured goods, councilor—I mean those you ship to Earth—they are not *given* us. They are exchanged for agricultural products."

Maynard smiled silkily. "Yes, I believe the delegate from Tethys has mentioned that fact at length. There is a delusion prevalent among some of us that only Terrestrial seeds grow properly—"

He was interrupted calmly by another, who said: "Now I am not from Tethys, but what you mention is not a delusion. I grow rye on Rhea, and I have never yet been able to duplicate Terrestrial bread. It just hasn't got the same taste." He addressed the audience in general, "In fact, I imported half a dozen Terrestrians five years back on agricultural laborer visas so they could oversee the robots. Now they can do wonders with the land, you know. Where they spit, corn grows fifteen feet high. Well, that helped a little. And using Terrestrian seed helped. But even if you grow Terrestrian grain, its seed won't hold the next year."

"Has your soil been tested by your government's agricultural department?" asked Maynard.

The Rhean grew haughty in his turn: "No better soil in the sector. And the rye is top-grade. I even sent a hundredweight down to Earth for nutritional clearance, and it came back with full marks." He rubbed one side of his chin, thoughtfully: "It's flavor I'm talking about. Doesn't seem to have the right—"

Maynard made an effort to dismiss him: "Flavor is dispensable temporarily. They'll be coming to us on our terms, these little-men-hordes of Earth, when they feel the pinch. We give up only this mysterious flavor, but they will have to give up atom-powered engines, farm machinery, and ground cars. It wouldn't be a bad idea, in fact, to attempt to get along without the Terrestrian flavors you are so concerned about. Let us appreciate the flavor of our home-grown products instead—which could stand comparison if we gave it a chance."

"That so?" the Rhean smiled. "I notice you're smoking Earth-grown tobacco."

"A habit I can break if I have to."

"Probably by giving up smoking. I wouldn't use Outer World tobacco for anything but killing mosquitoes."

He laughed a trifle too boisterously, and left the group. Maynard stared after him, a little pinch-nosed.

To Keilin, the little byplay over rye and tobacco brought a certain satisfaction. He regarded such personalities as the tiny reflection of certain Galactotolitical realities. Tethys and Rhea were the largest planets in the Galactic south, as Aurora was the largest in the Galactic north. All three planets were identically racist, identically exclusivist. Their views on Earth were similar and completely compatible. Ordinarily, one would think that there was no room to quarrel.

But Aurora was the oldest of the Outer Worlds, the most advanced, the strongest militarily—and, therefore, aspired to a sort of moral leadership of all the Worlds. That was sufficient in itself to arouse opposition, and Rhea and Tethys served as focal points for those who did not recognize Auroran leadership.

Keilin was somberly grateful for that situation. If Earth could but lean her weight properly, first in one direction, then in the other, an ultimate split, or even fragmentation—

He eyed Maynard cautiously, almost furtively, and wondered what effect this would have on the next day's debate. Already, the Auroran was more silent than was quite polite.

And then some under-secretary or sub-official threaded his way through the clusters of guests in finicking fashion, and beckoned to Maynard.

Keilin's following eyes watched the Auroran retreat with the newcomer, watched him listen closely, mouth a startled "What!" that was quite visible to the eye, though too far off to be heard, and then reach for a paper that the other handed him.

And as a result the next day's session of the conference went entirely differently than Keilin would have predicted.

Keilin discovered the details in the evening video-casts. The terrestrian government, it seemed, had sent a note to all the governments attending the conference. It warned each one bluntly that any agreement among them in military or economic affairs would be considered an unfriendly act against Earth and that it would be met with appropriate countermeasures. The note denounced Aurora, Tethys, and Rhea all equally. It accused them of being engaged in an imperialist conspiracy against Earth, and so on—and on—and on.

"Fools!" gritted Keilin, all but butting his head against the wall out of sheer chagrin. "Fools! Fools! Fools!" And his voice died away still muttering that same one word.

The next session of the conference was well and early attended by a set of angry delegates who were only too eager to grind into nothingness the disagreements still outstanding. When it ended, all matters concerning trade between Earth and the Outer Worlds had been placed in the hands of a commission with plenary powers.

Not even Aurora could have expected so complete and easy a victory, and Keilin, on his way back to Earth, longed for his voice to reach the video, so that it could be to others, and not to himself only, that he could shout his disgust.

Yet on Earth, some men smiled.

Once back on Earth, the voice of Keilin slowly swirled under and down—lost in the noisier clamor that shouted for action.

His popularity sank in proportion as trade restrictions grew. Slowly, the Outer Worlds drew the noose tighter. First, they instituted a strict application of a new system of export licensing. Secondly, they banned the export to Earth of all materials capable of being "used in a war effort." And finally they applied a very broad interpretation indeed of what could be considered usable in such a connection.

Imported luxuries—and imported necessities, too, for that matter—vanished or priced themselves upwards out of the reach of all but the very few.

So the people marched, and the voices shouted and the banners swung about in the sunlight, and the stones flew at the consulates—

Keilin shouted hoarsely and felt as if he were going mad.

Until, suddenly, Luiz Moreno, quite of his own accord, offered to appear on Keilin's program and submit to unrestricted questioning in his capacity as ex-Ambassador to Aurora and present Secretary without Portfolio.

To Keilin it had all the possibilities of a rebirth. He knew Moreno—no fool, he. With Moreno on his program, he was assured an audience as great as his greatest. With Moreno answering questions, certain misapprehensions might be removed, certain confusions might be straightened. The mere fact that Moreno wished to use his—*his*—program as sounding board might well mean that already a more pliant and sensible foreign policy might have been decided upon. Perhaps Maynard was correct, and the pinch was being felt and was working as predicted.

The list of questions had, of course, been submitted to Moreno in advance, but the ex-Ambassador had indicated that he would answer all of them, and any follow-up questions that might seem necessary.

It seemed quite ideal. Too ideal, perhaps, but only a criminal fool could worry over minutiae at this point.

There was an adequate ballyhoo—and when they faced one another across the little table, the red needle that indicated the number of video sets drawing power on that channel hovered well over the two hundred million mark. And there was an average of 2.7 listeners per video set. Now the theme; the official introduction.

Keilin rubbed his cheek slowly, as he waited for the signal.

Then, he began:

Q. Secretary Moreno, the question which interests all Earth at the moment, concerns the possibility of war. Suppose we start with that. Do you think there will be war?

A. If Earth is the only planet to be considered, I say: No, definitely not. In its history, Earth has had too much war, and has learned many times over how little can be gained by it.

Q. You say, "If Earth is the only planet to be considered—" Do you imply that factors outside our control will bring war?

A. I do not say "will"; but I could say "may." I cannot, of course speak for the Outer Worlds. I cannot pretend to know their motivations and intentions at this critical moment in Galactic history. They *may* choose war. I hope not. If so be that they do, however, we will defend ourselves. But in any case, *we* will never attack; *we* will not strike the first blow.

Q. Am I right in saying, then, that in your opinion there are no basic differences between Earth and the Outer Worlds, which cannot be solved by negotiation?

A. You certainly are. If the Outer Worlds were sincerely desirous of a solution, no disagreement between them and us could long exist.

Q. Does that include the question of immigration?

A. Definitely. Our own role in the matter is clear and beyond reproach. As matters stand, two hundred million human beings now occupy ninety-five percent of the available land in the universe. Six billions—that is, ninety-seven percent of all mankind—are squeezed into the other five percent. Such a situation is obviously unjust and, worse, unstable. Yet Earth, in the face of such injustice, has always been willing to treat this problem as soluble by degrees. It is still so willing. We should agree to reasonable quotas and reasonable restrictions. Yet the Outer Worlds have refused to discuss this matter. Over a space of five decades, they have rebuffed all efforts on the part of Earth to open negotiations.

Q. If such an attitude on the part of the Outer Worlds continues, do you *then* think there will be war?

A. I cannot believe that this attitude will continue. Our government will not cease hoping that the Outer Worlds will eventually reconsider their stand on the matter; that their sense of justice and right is not dead, but only sleeping.

Q. Mr. Secretary, let us pass on to another subject. Do you think that the United Worlds Commission set up by the Outer Worlds recently to control trade with Earth represents a danger to peace?

A. In the sense that its actions indicate a desire on the part of the Outer Worlds to isolate Earth, and to weaken it economically, I can say that it does.

Q. To what actions do you refer, sir?

A. To its actions in restricting interstellar trade with Earth to the point where, in credit values, the total stands now at less than ten percent of what it did three months ago.

Q. But do such restrictions really represent an economic danger to Earth? For instance, is it not true that trade with the Outer Worlds represents an almost insignificant part of total Terrestrian trade? And is it not true that the importations from the Outer Worlds reach only a tiny minority of the population at best?

A. Your questions now are representative of a profound fallacy which is very common among our isolationists. In credit values, it is true that interstellar trade represents only five percent of our total trade, but ninety-five percent of our atomic engines are imported. Eighty percent of our thorium, sixty-five percent of our cesium, sixty percent of our molybdenum and tin are imported. The list can be extended almost indefinitely, and it is quite easy to see that the five percent is an extremely important, a vital, five percent. Furthermore, if a large manufacturer receives a shipment of atomic steel-shapers from Rhea, it does not follow that the benefit redounds only to him. Every man on Earth who uses steel implements or objects manufactured by steel implements benefits.

Q. But is it not true that the current restrictions on Earth's interstellar trade have cut our grain and cattle exports to almost nothing? And far from harming Earth, isn't this really a boon to our own hungry people?

A. This is another serious fallacy. That Earth's good food supply is tragically inadequate is true. The government would be the last to deny it. But our food exports do not represent any serious drain upon this supply. Less than one fifth of one percent of Earth's food is exported, and in return we obtain, for instance, fertilizers and farm machinery which more than make up for that small loss by increasing agricultural efficiency. Therefore, by buying less food from us, the Outer Worlds are engaged, in effect, in cutting our already inadequate food supply.

Q. Are you ready to admit, then, Secretary Moreno, that at least part of the blame for this situation should rest with Earth itself? In other words, we come to my next question: Was it not a diplomatic blunder of the first magnitude for the government to issue its inflammatory note denouncing the intentions of the Outer Worlds before those intentions had been made clear at the Interplanetary Conference?

A. I think those intentions were quite clear at the time.

Q. I beg pardon, sir, but I was at the conference. At the time the note was issued, there was almost a stalemate among the Outer World delegates. Those of Rhea and Tethys strongly opposed economic action against Earth, and there was considerable chance that Aurora and its bloc might have been defeated. Earth's note ended that possibility instantly.

A. Well, what is your question, Mr. Keilin?

Q. In view of my statements, do you or do you not think Earth's note to have been a criminal error of diplomacy which can now be made up only by a policy of intelligent conciliation?

A. You use strong language. However, I cannot answer the question directly, since I do not agree with your major premise. I cannot believe that the delegates of the Outer Worlds could behave in the manner you describe. In the first place, it is well known that the Outer Worlds are proud of their boast that the percentage of insanity, psychoses, and even relatively minor maladjustments of personality are almost at the vanishing point in their society. It is one of their strongest arguments against Earth, that we have more psychiatrists than plumbers and yet are more pinched for want of the former. The delegates to the conference represented the best of this so-stable society. And now you would have me believe that these demigods would, in a moment of pique, have reversed their opinions and instituted a major change in the economic policy of fifty worlds. I cannot believe them capable of such childish and perverse activity, and must therefore insist that any action they took was based not upon any note from Earth, but upon motivations that go deeper.

Q. But I saw the effect upon them with my own eyes, sir. Remember, they were being scolded in what they considered to be insolent language from an inferior people. There can be no doubt, sir, that as a whole, the men of the Outer Worlds are a remarkably stable people, despite your sarcasm, but their attitude toward Earth represents a weak point in this stability.

A. Are you asking me questions, or are you defending the racist views and policies of the Outer Worlds?

Q. Well, accepting your viewpoint that Earth's note did no harm, what good could it have done? Why should it have been sent?

A. I think we were justified in presenting our side of the question before the bar of Galactic public opinion. I believe we have exhausted the subject. What is your next question, please? It is the last, isn't it?

Q. It is. It has recently been reported that the Terrestrian government will take stern measures against those dealing in smuggling operations. Is this consistent with the government's view that lowered trade relations are detrimental to Earth's welfare?

A. Our primary concern is peace, and not our own immediate welfare. The Outer Worlds have adopted certain trade restrictions. We disapprove of them, and consider them a great injustice. Nevertheless, we shall adhere to them, so that no planet may say that we have given the slightest pretext for hostilities. For instance, I am privileged to announce here for the first time that in the past month, five ships, traveling under false Earth registry, were stopped while being engaged in the smuggling of Outer World materiel into Earth. Their goods were confiscated and their personnel imprisoned. This is an earnest of our good intentions.

Q. Outer World ships?

A. Yes. But traveling under false Earth registry, remember.

Q. And the men imprisoned are citizens of the Outer Worlds?

A. I believe so. However, they were breaking not only our laws, but those of the Outer Worlds as well, and therefore doubly forfeited their interplanetary rights. I think the interview had better close, now.

Q. But this—

It was at this point that the broadcast came to a sudden end. The conclusion of Keilin's last sentence was never heard by anyone but Moreno. It ended like this:

"—means war."

But Luiz Moreno was no longer on the air. So as he drew on his gloves, he smiled and, with infinite meaning, shrugged his shoulders in a little gesture of indifference.

There were no witnesses to that shrug.

The Gathering at Aurora was still in session. Franklin Maynard had dropped out for the moment in utter weariness. He faced his son whom he now saw for the first time in naval uniform.

"At least *you're* sure of what will happen, aren't you?"

In the young man's response, there was no weariness at all, no apprehension; nothing but utter satisfaction. "This is it, dad!"

"Nothing bothers you, then? You don't think we've been maneuvered into this."

"Who cares if we have? It's Earth's funeral."

Maynard shook his head: "But you realize that we've been put in the wrong. The Outer World citizens they hold are law-breakers. Earth is within its rights."

His son frowned: "I hope you're not going to make statements like that to the Gathering, dad. I don't see that Earth is justified at all. All right, what if smuggling was going on. It was just because some Outer Worlders are willing to pay black market prices for Terrestrial food. If Earth had any sense, she could look the other way, and everyone would benefit. She makes enough noise about how she needs our trade, so why doesn't she do something about it. Anyway, I don't see that we ought to leave any good Aurorans or other Outer Worlders in the hands of those apemen. Since they won't give them up, we'll make them. Otherwise, none of us will be safe next time."

"I see that you've adopted the popular opnions, anyway."

"The opinions are my own. If they're popular opinion also, it's because they make sense. Earth *wants* a war. Well, they'll get it."

"But why do they want a war, eh? Why do they force our hands? Our entire economic policy of the past months was only intended to force a change in their attitude without war."

He was talking to himself, but his son answered with the final argument: "I don't care why they wanted war. They've *got* it now, and we're going to smash them."

Maynard returned to the Gathering, but even as the drone of debate re-filled the room, he thought, with a twinge that there would be no Terrestrian alfalfa that year. He regretted the milk. In fact, even the beef seemed, somehow, to be just a little less savory—

The vote came in the early hours of the morning. Aurora declared war. Most of the worlds of the Aurora bloc joined it by dawn.

In the history books, the war was later known as the Three Weeks' War. In the first week, Auroran forces occupied several of the trans-

Plutonian asteroids, and at the beginning of the third week, the bulk of Earth's home fleet was all but completely destroyed in a battle within the orbit of Saturn by an Aurora fleet not one-quarter its size, numerically.

Declarations of war from the Outer Worlds yet neutral followed like the *pop-pop* of a string of firecrackers.

On the twenty-first day of the war, lacking two hours, Earth surrendered.

The negotiations of peace terms took place among the Outer Worlds. Earth's activities were concerned with signing only. The conditions of peace were unusual, perhaps unique, and under the force of an unprecedented humiliation, all the hordes of Earth seemed suddenly struck with a silence that came from a shamed anger too strong for words.

The terms mentioned were perhaps best commented upon by a voice on the Auroran video two days after they were made public. It can be quoted in part:

". . . There is nothing in or on Earth that we of the Outer Worlds can need or want. All that was ever worthwhile on Earth left it centuries ago in the persons of our ancestors.

"They call us the children of Mother Earth, but that is not so, for we are the descendants of a Mother Earth that no longer exists, a Mother Earth that we brought with us. The Earth of today bears us at best a cousinly relation. No more.

"Do we want their resources? Why, they have none for themselves. Can we use their industry or science? They are almost dead for lack of ours. Can we use their man power? Ten of them are not worth a single robot. Do we even want the dubious glory of ruling them? There is no such glory. As our helpless and incompetent inferiors, they would be only a drag upon us. They would divert from our own use food, labor, and administrative ability.

"So they have nothing to give us, but the space they occupy in our thought. They have nothing to free us from, but themselves. They cannot benefit us in any way other than in their absence.

"It is for that reason, that the peace terms have been defined as they have been. We wish them no harm, so let them have their own solar system. Let them live there in peace. Let them mold their own destiny in their own way, and we will not disturb them there by even the least hint of our presence. But we in turn want peace. We in turn would guide our own future in our own way. So we do not want *their* presence. And with that end in view, an Outer World fleet will patrol the boundaries of their system, Outer World bases will be established on their outermost asteroids, so that we may make sure they do not intrude on our territory.

"There will be no trade, no diplomatic relationships, no travel, no communications. They are fenced off, locked out, hermetically sealed away. Out here we have a new universe, a second creation of Man, a higher Man—

"They ask us: What will become of Earth? We answer: That is Earth's problem. Population growth can be controlled. Resources can be efficiently exploited. Economic systems can be revised. We know, for we have done so. If they cannot, let them go the way of the dinosaur, and make room.

"Let them make room, instead of forever demanding room!"

And so an impenetrable curtain swung slowly shut about the Solar System. The stars in Earth's sky became only stars again as in the long-dead days before the first ship had penetrated the barrier of light's speed.

The government that had made war and peace resigned, but there was no one really to take their place. The legislature elected Luiz Moreno—ex-Ambassador to Aurora, ex-Secretary without Portfolio—as President *pro tem,* and Earth as a whole was too numbed to agree or disagree. There was only a widespread relief that someone existed who would be willing to take the job of trying to guide the destinies of a world in prison.

Very few realized how well-planned an ending this was, or with what calculation, Moreno found himself in the president's chair.

Ernest Keilin said hopelessly from the video screen: "We are only ourselves now. For us, there is no universe and no past—only Earth, and the future."

That night he heard from Luiz Moreno once again, and before morning he left for the capital.

Moreno's presence seemed incongruent within the stiffly formal president's mansion. He was suffering from a cold again, and snuffled when he talked.

Keilin regarded him with a self-terrifying hostility; an almost singing hatred in which he could feel his fingers begin to twitch in the first gestures of choking. Perhaps he shouldn't have come— Well, what was the difference; the orders had been plain. If he had not come, he would have been brought.

The new president looked at him sharply: "You have to alter your attitude toward me, Keilin. I know you regard me as one of the Gravediggers of Earth—isn't that the phrase you used last night?—but you must listen to me quietly for a while. In your present state of suppressed rage, I doubt if you could hear me."

"I will hear whatever you have to say, Mr. President."

"Well—the external amenities, at least. That's hopeful. Or do you think a video-tracer is attached to the room?"

Keilin merely lifted his eyebrows.

Moreno said: "It isn't. We are quite alone. We *must* be alone, otherwise how could I tell you safely that it is being arranged for you to be elected president under a constitution now being devised. Eh, what's the matter?"

Then he grinned at the look of bloodless amazement in Keilin's face. "Oh, you don't believe it. Well, it's past your stopping. And before an hour is up, you'll understand."

"I'm to be president?" Keilin struggled with a strange, hoarse voice. Then, more firmly: "You are mad."

"No. Not I. Those out there, rather. Out there in the Outer Worlds." There was a sudden vicious intensity in Moreno's eyes, and face, and voice, so that you forgot he was a little monkey of a man with a perpetual cold. You didn't notice the wrinkled sloping forehead. You forgot the baldish head and ill-fitting clothes. There was only the bright and luminous look in his eyes, and the hard incision in his voice. *That* you noticed.

Keilin reached blindly backward for a chair, as Moreno came closer and spoke with increasing intensity.

"Yes," said Moreno. "Those out among the Stars. The godlike ones. The stately supermen. The strong, handsome master-race. *They* are mad. But only we on Earth know it.

"Come, you have heard of the Pacific Project. I know you have. You denounced it to Cellioni once, and called it a fake. But it isn't a fake. And almost none of it is a secret. In fact, the only secret about it was that almost none of it was a secret.

"You're no fool, Keilin. You just never stopped to work it all out. And yet you were on the track. You had the feel of it. What was it you said that time you were interviewing me on the program? Something about the attitude of the Outer Worldling toward the Earthman being the only flaw in the former's stability. That was it, wasn't it? Or something like that? Very well, then; good! You had the first third of the Pacific Project in your mind at the time, and it was no secret after all, was it?

"Ask yourself, Keilin—what was the attitude of the typical Auroran to a typical Earthman? A feeling of superiority? That's the first thought, I suppose. But, tell me, Keilin, if he really felt superior, *really* superior, would it be so necessary for him to call such continuous attention to it. What kind of superiority is it that must be continuously bolstered by the constant repetition of phrases such as 'apemen,' 'submen,' 'half-animals of Earth,' and so on? That is not the calm internal assurance of superiority. Do you waste epithets on earthworms? No, there is something else there.

"Or let us approach it from another tack. Why do Outer World tourists stay in special hotels, travel in inclosed ground-cars, and have rigid, if unwritten, rules against social intermingling? Are they afraid of pollution? Strange then that they are not afraid to eat our food and drink our wine and smoke our tobacco.

"You see, Keilin, there are no psychiatrists on the Outer Worlds. The supermen are, so they say, too well adjusted. But here on Earth, as the proverb goes, there are more psychiatrists than plumbers, and they get lots of practice. So it is we, and not they, who know the truth about this Outer World superiority-complex; who know it to be simply a wild reaction against an overwhelming feeling of *guilt*.

"Don't you think that can be so? You shake your head as though you disagree. You don't see that a handful of men who clutch a Galaxy while billions starve for lack of room *must* feel a subconscious guilt, no matter what? And, since they won't share the loot, don't you see that the only way they can justify themselves is to try to convince themselves that Earthmen, after all, are inferior, that they do not deserve the Galaxy, that a new race of men have been created out there and that we here are only the diseased remnants of an old race that should die out like the dinosaur, through the working of inexorable natural laws.

"Ah, if they could only convince themselves of that, they would no longer be guilty, but merely superior. Only it doesn't work; it never does. It requires constant bolstering; constant repetition, constant reinforcement. And still it doesn't quite convince.

"Best of all, if only they could pretend that Earth and its population do not exist at all. When you visit Earth, therefore, avoid Earthmen; or they might make you uncomfortable by not looking inferior enough. Sometimes they might look miserable instead, and nothing more. Or worse still, they might even seem intelligent—as I did, for instance, on Aurora.

"Occasionally, an Outer Worlder like Moreanu did crop up, and was able to recognize guilt for what it was without being afraid to say so out loud. He spoke of the duty the Outer Worlds owed Earth—and so he was dangerous to us. For if the others listened to him and had offered token assistance to Earth, their guilt might have been assuaged in their own minds; and that without any lasting help to Earth. So Moreanu was removed through our web-weaving, and the way left clear to those who were unbending, who refused to admit guilt, and whose reaction could therefore be predicted and manipulated.

"Send them an arrogant note, for instance, and they automatically strike back with a useless embargo that merely gives us the ideal pretext for war. Then lose a war quickly, and you are sealed off by the annoyed supermen. No communication, no contact. You no longer exist to annoy them. Isn't that simple? Didn't it work out nicely?"

Keilin finally found his voice, because Moreno gave him time by stopping. He said: "You mean that all this was planned? You *did* deliberately instigate the war for the purpose of sealing Earth off from the Galaxy? You sent out the men of the Home Fleet to sure death because you wanted defeat? Why, you're a monster, a . . . a—"

Moreno frowned: "Please relax. It was not as simple as you think, and I am not a monster. Do you think the war could simply be—instigated? It had to be nurtured gently in just the right way and to just the right conclusion. If we had made the first move; if we had been the aggressor; if we had in any way put the fault on our side—why they of the Outer Worlds would have occupied Earth, and ground it under. They would no longer feel guilty, you see, if *we* committed a crime against *them*. Or, again, if we fought a protracted war, or one in which we inflicted damage, they could succeed in shifting the blame.

"But we didn't. We merely imprisoned Auroran smugglers, and were obviously within our rights. They had to go to war over it because only so could they protect their superiority which in turn protected them against the horrors of guilt. And we lost quickly. Scarcely an Auroran died. The guilt grew deeper and resulted in exactly the peace treaty our psychiatrists had predicted.

"And as for sending men out to die, that is a commonplace in every war—and a necessity. It was necessary to fight a battle, and, naturally, there were casualties."

"But why?" interrupted Keilin, wildly. "Why? *Why?* Why does all this gibberish seem to make sense to you? What have we gained? What can we possibly gain out of the present situation?"

"Gained, man? You ask what we've gained? Why, we've gained the universe. What has held us back so far? *You* know what Earth has needed these last centuries. You yourself once outlined it forcefully to Cellioni. We need a positronic robot society and an atomic power technology. We need chemical farming and we need population control. Well, what's prevented that, eh? Only the customs of centuries which said robots were evil since they deprived human beings of jobs, that population control was merely the murder of unborn children, and so on. And worse, there was always the safety valve of emigration either actual or hoped-for.

"But now we cannot emigrate. We're *stuck* here. Worse than that, we have been humiliatingly defeated by a handful of men out in the stars, and we've had a humiliating treaty of peace forced upon us. What Earthman wouldn't subconsciously burn for revenge, and what human motivation is stronger than the desire for revenge. Self-preservation has frequently knuckled under to that tremendous yearning to 'get even.'

"And that is the second third of the Pacific Project, the recognition of the revenge motive. As simple as that.

"And how can we know that this is really so? Why, it has been demonstrated in history scores of times. Defeat a nation, but don't crush it entirely, and in a generation or two or three it will be stronger than it was before. Why? Because in the interval, sacrifices will have been made for revenge that would not have been made for mere conquest.

"Think! Rome beat Carthage rather easily the first time, but was almost defeated the second. Every time Napoleon defeated the European coalition, he laid the groundwork for another just a little bit harder to defeat, until he himself was crushed by the eighth. It took four years to defeat Wilhelm of medieval Germany, and six much more dangerous years to stop his successor, Hitler.

"There you are! Until now, Earth needed to change its way of life only for greater comfort and happiness. A minor item like that could always wait. But now it must change for revenge and that will not wait. And I want that change for its own sake.

"Only—I am not the man to lead. I am tarred with the failure of yesteryear, and will remain so until, long after I am bone-dust, Earth learns the truth. But you . . . *you,* and others like you, have always fought for the road to modernization. *You* will be in charge. It may take a hundred years. Grandchildren of men unborn may be the first to see its completion. But at least you will see the start.

"Eh, what do you say?"

Keilin was fumbling at the dream. He seemed to see it in a misty distance—a new and reborn Earth. But the change in attitude was too extreme. It could not be done just yet. He shook his head.

He said: "What makes you think the Outer Worlds would allow such a change, supposing what you say to be true. They will be watching, I am sure, and they will detect a growing danger and put a stop to it. Can you deny that?"

Moreno threw his head back and laughed noiselessly. He gasped out: "But we have still a third left of the Pacific Project, a last, subtle and ironic third—

"The Outer Worlders call the men of Earth the subhuman dregs of a great race, but *we* are the men of *Earth.* Do you realize what that means? We live on a planet upon which for a billion years, life —the life that has culminated in Mankind—has been adapting itself. There is not a microscopic part of Man, not a tiny working of his mind, that has not as its reason some tiny facet of the physical make-up of Earth, or of the biological make-up of Earth's other life-forms, or of the sociological make-up of the society about him.

"No other planet can substitute for Earth, *in Man's present shape.*

"The Outer Worlders exist as they do, only because pieces of Earth have been transplanted. Soil has been brought out there; plants; animals; men. They keep themselves surrounded by an artificial Earth-born geology which has within it, for instance, those traces of cobalt, zinc, and copper which human chemistry must have. They surround themselves by Earth-born bacteria and algae which have the ability to make those inorganic traces available in just the right way and in just the right quantity.

"And they maintain that situation by continued imports—luxury imports, they call it—from Earth.

"But on the Outer Worlds, even with Terrestrian soil laid down to bedrock, they cannot keep rain from falling and rivers from flowing, so that there is an inevitable, if slow, admixture with the native soil; an inevitable contamination of Terrestrian soil bacteria with the native bacteria, and an exposure, in any case, to a different atmosphere and to solar radiations of different types. Terrestrian bacteria disappear or change. And then plant life changes. And then animal life.

"No great change, mind you. Plant life would not become poisonous or nonnutritious in a day, or year, or decade. But already, the men of the Outer Worlds can detect the loss or change of the trace compounds that are responsible for that infinitely elusive thing we call 'flavor.' It has gone that far.

"And it will go further. Do you know, for instance, that on Aurora, nearly one half the native bacterial species known have protoplasm based on a fluorocarbon rather than hydrocarbon chemistry. Can you imagine the essential foreignness of such an environment?

"Well, for two decades now, the bacteriologists and physiologists of Earth have studied various forms of Outer World life—the only portion of the Pacific Project that has been truly secret—and the transplanted Terrestrian life is already beginning to show certain changes on the subcellular level. *Even among the humans.*

"And here is the irony. The Outer Worlders, by their rigid racism and unbending genetic policies are consistently eliminating from among themselves any children that show signs of adapting themselves to their respective planets in any way that departs from the norm. They are maintaining—they *must* maintain as a result of their own thought-processes—an artificial criterion of 'healthy' humanity, which is based on Terrestrian chemistry and not their own.

"But now that Earth has been cut off from them; now that not even a trickle of Terrestrian soil and life will reach them, change will be piled on change. Sicknesses will come, mortality will increase, child abnormalities will become more frequent—"

"And then?" asked Keilin, suddenly caught up.

"And then? Well, they are physical scientists—leaving such inferior sciences as biology to us. And they cannot abandon their sensation of superiority and their arbitrary standard of human perfection. They will never detect the change till it is too late to fight it. Not all mutations are clearly visible, and there will be an increasing revolt against the mores of those stiff Outer World societies. There will be a century of increasing physical and social turmoil which will prevent any interference on their part with us.

"We will have a century of rebuilding and revitalization, and at the end of it, we shall face an outer Galaxy which will either be dying or changed. In the first case, we will build a second Terrestrian Empire, more wisely and with greater knowledge than we did the first; one based on a strong and modernized Earth.

"In the second case, we will face perhaps ten, twenty, or even all fifty Outer Worlds, each with a slightly different variety of Man. Fifty humanoid species, no longer united against us, each increasingly adapted to its own planet, each with a sufficient tendency toward atavism to love Earth, to regard it as the great and original Mother.

"And racism will be dead, for variety will then be the great fact of Humanity, and not uniformity. Each type of Man will have a world of its own, for which no other world could quite substitute, and on which no other type could live quite as well. And other worlds can be settled to breed still newer varieties, until out of the grand intellectual mixture, Mother Earth will finally have given birth not to merely a Terrestrian, but to a *Galactic* Empire."

Keilin said, fascinated: "You foresee all this so certainly."

"Nothing is *truly* certain; but the best minds on Earth agree on this. There may be unforeseen stumbling blocks on the way, but to remove those will be the adventure of our great-grandchildren. Of *our* adventure, one phase has been successfully concluded; and another phase is beginning. Join us, Keilin."

Slowly, Keilin began to think that perhaps Moreno was not a monster after all—

Yielding slowly under the pressure of innumerable marauders, Earth drew back upon herself. The Solar Empire disintegrated piecemeal as the homeland prepared for the final battle. Terrestrial patrols still manned outposts, but their recall was only a matter of time. They could leave behind, however, the sparks of freedom which, should Earth itself fall, someday could burst into the flame of another renaissance.

THERE SHALL BE DARKNESS

by C. L. Moore

Blue Venusian twilight filled the room where Quanna sat combing her hair before the glass. It was very quiet here. Quanna drew the long, pale strands through her comb with a somnolent rhythm, meeting her own eyes in the mirror. Reflected there she could see the windows behind her, blowing curtains that veiled the tremendous blue peaks which walled in Darva from the world. From far away a thunderous echo of avalanche shook the evening air a little and rumbled into silence.

No one—not even another Venusian—could have guessed what was going on behind the pale, translucent oval of Quanna's face, the unchanging dark eyes. She wore a blue-green robe the color of the evening sky over Darva, and in the blue dusk her hair took on a faintly greenish cast. She was thinking of murder.

Behind her the door creaked. A man in uniform came into the room wearily, running his fingers through his black hair. The green star of Earth glittered on his tunic. He grinned at Quanna.

"Get me a drink, will you?" he asked her in English. "Lord, how tired I am!"

Quanna was on her feet in a rustle of satin and a cloud of faint perfume. Her green-blond hair was so fine it seemed to float upon the air as she turned. If ever there was any betrayal of feeling upon Quanna's pale Venusian face, it showed tenderness when she looked at James Douglas, commander of the last Terrestrial Patrol left on Venus.

"Come and lie down," she said in her gentlest voice. Her English was almost as easy as his own. "You do need a drink, poor darling. You've been working late again, Jamie?"

He nodded, letting her draw him to the deep couch below the windows which opened upon the high blue mountains and the roofs of Darva. She stood for a moment watching his face as he relaxed with a sigh upon the cushions. The couch creaked a little beneath him, for Douglas was a big man, built in the tradition of his Scottish ancestors upon another world, almost a giant among the slim Venusians. He was barrel-chested, thick through the shoulders; and his heavy black hair had gone frosty at the temples quite definitely in the last few months. Jamie Douglas had had much to think about, in solitude, since the last dispatches from Base came in.

He buried his crooked nose in the glass Quanna brought and drank thirstily, letting the cool, watered whiskey go burning down his throat.

"Nothing like *segir,*" he grinned up at the girl. "I'll miss it when" —he caught himself—"if I'm ever recalled to Earth."

Quanna's eyes veiled. An Earth woman would have pounced upon the implication in that remark and dragged it into daylight. The Venusian girl waited. They both knew she would weave it into conversation perhaps hours later, worming the forbidden information out of him irresistibly, imperceptibly, as she had so often done in the past. Douglas cursed himself silently and gulped *segir* again.

Quanna's gaze lingered on his face as he drank. Twenty years under the flowing cloud-tides of Venus had not bleached his dark skin to pallor, but they had set their own marks upon his face. The broken nose was a memory of a mountain ambush in his subaltern days, and the long, fading scar above one ear an insignia of the fight in which he had won his captaincy. Even as long ago as that Imperial Earth had begun to feel her fingers slip upon her colonial worlds, and there had been fierce fighting in the mountains of Venus. There still was, but it would not last much longer—

Douglas held out his emptied glass. "Another," he said, and loosened his tunic collar. "I'm tired."

Quanna laid a long, cool hand upon his forehead in a gesture of reticent tenderness before she turned away to the little pantry where the ice and the *segir* were. The long folds of her robe hid what she was doing, but she did not drop a tablet into the drink this time. There had been enough in the first, and besides—besides she had information to draw out of him before she went away.

She pulled up a hassock and took her monochord harp from the wall after he had begun on the second drink, and began to pluck a plaintive melody from the single string, stopping it against its movable bridges with an intricate fingering. Douglas nodded in time with the music and began to hum, smiling at her.

"Funny," he mused. "You're a cosmopolitan, my dear, even if you've never stepped a foot off Venus. Scottish ballad on a Martian harp, transposed to Venusian melody. What an old song it is, Quanna." He began to sing the words softly, his voice unmusical:

"The Otterburn's bonny burn,
It's pleasant there to be,
But there is naught on Otterburn
To feed my men and me—"

He shook himself a little and quieted. Quanna saw something dark and unhappy move across his face, and she struck one of two quivering notes from the string and said in a voice pitched to the music, so that it scarcely broke the silence at all:

"I'd like to see Earth, Jamie. Could I go back with you?"

"I wish you could," he answered in a low voice. "It won't be easy, my dear—I'll miss so much on Venus. I—" He sat up suddenly and scowled at her under black brows. "That wasn't fair, Quanna! You wouldn't catch me like that if I weren't tired. Oh, yes, damn it, I suppose you'll have to know soon, anyhow. Orders came today. We're going back."

"The last of the Patrols," murmured Quanna, still stroking the harp to faint music. "Venus will be free again, Jamie?"

His heavy brows drew down again above the crooked nose. "Free?" he said bitterly. "Oh, yes, free for Vastari and his cutthroats, if that's what you're thinking of. There'll be no more safety anywhere on Venus, if that's what freedom means to you. All this culture we've tried to build up in our three hundred years will crash in—oh, three hundred days, or less, once the protection of the Patrol fails. You'll have barbarism back again, my sweet. Is that what freedom means to a Venusian?"

She smiled at him, her face pale in the gathering twilight.

"Jamie, Jamie," she rebuked him gently. "Our ways were good enough before the Earthmen came. And you'll be going home—"

He set down his glass half emptied, as if the thought had closed his throat. Looking out between the long, swaying draperies, he said heavily: "Oh, sure— I was born there, forty-odd years ago. I suppose it's home. But—I'll miss Venus, Quanna." He reached out for her and. "I'll miss you— I . . . I'm sleepy, Quanna. Play 'Otterburn' again, will you, my dear? I think I'll have a nap before dinner."

When Douglas was breathing evenly, Quanna put a pillow straighter under his black head, pulled a light coverlet over him and hung the harp away. In her bedroom she took down a velvet cloak of deep emerald-green and changed her sandals to riding boots of soft leather.

With the dark cloak hooding her, she paused by the door and touched a panel that slid inward without a sound. Not even the Earthman who designed the house knew about that panel, or about many other secret things which the Venusian workmen had built into the headquarters of the Terrestrial Patrol.

Quanna took a pistol from a shelf inside the panel and buckled it about her waist over the satin gown she wore. Her fingers lingered on a long, flat box on the shelf and she drew it out hesitantly, glancing over her shoulder around the empty room.

Inside the box, bedded in velvet, lay a dagger with a silver haft and a long glass blade. Quanna took it out of its nest and tilted the crystal to the light. Venusian characters were traced in water colors on the blade. On one side they declared in crimson, "Vastari Shall Be King," and on the other were the simple characters that spelled a name, "James Douglas." By a coincidence, the Venusian name for Douglas had the same meaning as his Scottish patronym in the ancient Gaelic—Dhu Glas. Both meant "the dark man."

The dagger Quanna held was a ceremonial weapon, that could be used only once. It had never been used—yet. The crimson lettering would wash off at the first touch of any moisture. And the blade would splinter in its wound. It was meant to splinter. It had been given to Quanna six months past, with great ceremony. She should have used it long ago.

She laid it back in its box and closed the panel quickly. She woke in the blue night sometimes, trembling, out of dreams about that glass dagger.

She drew the green cloak about her and went out swiftly. No one but the Venusian servants saw her pass, and they made furtive obeisance and looked after her with reverent eyes. So did the grooms in the stable where her saddled horse stood waiting. One of them said, "The waterfall cave, lady, up toward Thunder Range," and gave her the grave salute due Venusian rank. Quanna nodded and took the reins.

The Earth officer on duty at the outer gate never saw her pass. His men drew his attention away just long enough for the cloaked figure on the padding dark horse to slip like a shadow out of the gate, and the young Earthman could have sworn afterward that no one had gone that way.

The horse took to the rising trail outside Darva with its padded gait that has a rocking-chair smoothness. Even the horses of Venus go furtively, on silent feet. This one climbed steadily up the twisting trail through the blue dusk which passes for night in the zone where Darva lies.

Night and day have only roughly equivalent terms in the Venusian tongues, but there is a slow rhythm of thermals over a broad belt of Dayside, caused by the libration of the planet, that gives something corresponding to them. There are periods of dim-blue chill, and periods of opalescent noons when the sun is a liquid blaze behind high mists. The intervals are months long in some parts of Dayside, but here the tremendous mountains create air currents of their own, and the cloud-tides have a much briefer rhythm, though still too varied to make Venusians clearly understand night and day.

The great blue mountains loomed purple and violet in the dusk as Quanna rode up the trail. She could hear countless waterfalls tinkling and trickling away like music all around her, a background to the slow, far-off thunder of a rockslide that shook the cliffs with its echoes.

The lifting crags that rushed straight up a thousand feet into the clouds were shocking to Earth eyes even after a lifetime on Venus, but Quanna scarcely noticed the familiar sheer cliffs of purple rock hanging like doom itself above her as she climbed. She had been born among these cliffs, but she did not mean to die here. If she had her way, she would die on another planet and be buried under the smooth green soil of Earth, where sunlight and starlight and moonlight changed in a clear sky she could not quite imagine, for all the tales she had heard.

The cavern she was seeking lay two hours high in the towering peaks above Darva. No one but a Venusian could have found it in less than days. Both Quanna and her horse knew the path well enough, but it was a difficult climb even for them, and when they came out into the cathedral-walled canyon where a thin waterfall swayed like smoke, the horse's sides were heaving with the steepness of the climb.

In these narrow walls the waterfall made a thunderous music. Quanna drew her cloak over her face and rode straight through the smoking veil of water, into the Gothic arch of the cavern beyond. She whistled three clear, liquid notes as she came, and heard answering music echo from the walls, piercing the roar of the waterfall.

Around two bends firelight flickered. Quanna slid off the horse into the waiting arms of servants, and went down a sparkling sandy slope toward the fire. Light danced bewilderingly upon a fairyland of crystalline columns which slow centuries had built of dripping water here. It was an Aladdin cave of flashing jewels in the firelight.

Of the group by the fire, all but one man rose as Quanna came forward, her scarlet boots showing and fading with delicate precision beneath her emerald cloak. Quanna had been trained meticulously in every rite that befits a Venusian woman, and ceremonious behavior was not the least of her knowledge. Even her gait was traditional as she approached the men before the fire.

They had risen—all but the hooded old one—not in deference to her rank or her womanhood, for women are not held highly on Venus, but because she was an important emissary bringing news of the enemy. And had they had reason to think her news would be bad or her prestige in the enemy camp lowered, they would not have risen. Under the elaborate ceremony of Venusian courts is a basis of dog-eat-dog which shocks Earthmen. Venusians scorn the unsuccessful and toady to the strong with a certain courtliness which ingratiates even as it repels.

The richly colored robes of the men made points of jewel colors dance along the crystalline walls as they moved. A young man pushed impetuously out among them and came forward, his crimson cloak swinging from supple shoulders, his long fair hair swinging, too, as he came to meet the girl. The two of them were as alike in looks as blood relation can make man and woman.

Quanna took both his hands with the exact degree of deference which was due from her temporary man-status as important spy. Vastari's face blazed with impatient eagerness as Quanna exhanged the proper ceremonious greetings with the group of tribe leaders around the fire. It amused her a little to let her royal brother wait upon her. She met the fierce stares of the other men composedly, too accustomed all her life to seeing that avid hope for disaster in every face to notice it much now. No Venusian rises to influence without knowing very well the eager, searching stare of rivals hungry for a sign of weakness.

Last of all she smiled at the hooded figure by the fire, who gave her back a greeting in a harsh, hissing voice that was very pleasant to her ears.

"Well?" demanded Vastari, pulling her to a seat upon cushions by the fire as the last ceremonies fell silent and the leaders grouped wolfishly around to listen. "Well, how goes it, sister? Is the glass knife broken yet?"

"Not yet," said Quanna, making her voice low and confident. "The Earthmen have a fable about a goose that laid golden eggs. It's still too soon to kill ours, brother. The Dark Man gave me great news only a few hours ago." She used a Venusian term of time measurement which is so complex that few Earthmen ever master it. Watching the avid eyes fixed upon her all around the fire, she went on: "The last Patrol is leaving Venus. The orders came in today."

Vastari smacked his ringed hands together and cried out something exultant in a voice too choked for articulation. The fire always smoldering behind his eyes blazed up with all but perceptible violence.

"Leaving!" he cried. "So they've come to it at last. Do you hear, all of you? That means freedom! Venus under Venusian rule, after three hundred years of Earth tyranny! Is it true, Quanna?"

"True enough, surely," said a harsh voice behind him. They all turned. The cloaked figure at the fireside had thrown back his hood from a crest of white hair and was smiling at them sadly now, horny lids drooping over his eyes. "I've seen it coming all my life, children. Mars was great once, too, you see." He lifted bony shoulders in a shrug.

"But aren't you glad, Ghej?" Vastari spun toward him, scarlet cloak flying with the motion. Everything he did had a quicksilver volatility. "The freedom we were fighting for, put right in our hands? No more hiding in the mountains for us, Ghej! No more Earth laws! A free Venus, after three hundred years of tyranny!"

The old Martian lifted his peaked brows.

"Is freedom always good, then? Freedom can mean anarchy, my boy."

Vastari snapped his fingers impatiently. "Out of anarchy, something may grow," he said. "Under tyranny, nothing can. You'll help us, won't you, Ghej?"

Ghej looked up somberly under his triangular lids. "Against Earth? You don't need help against the Imperial Planet, son. Earth has brought her own ruin upon her, and nothing we can do will affect that. I know. I saw Mars fall."

He put his chin in his hand and stared into the fire under heavy lids. Ghej had a strange way of talking about the past of millenniums ago as if he himself had been present. It was the result of the vivid three-dimensional pictorial records by which all Martians learn their history in childhood.

Vastari's face, as he turned away, was unconsciously eloquent with the impatience of the young for the dreaming old.

One of the tribe leaders leaned forward, jutting a scarred, wolfish face above his robe of apricot velvet. His eyes glittered at Quanna.

"She brings news the old Martian could have told us years ago," he declared, his voice jealous and eager. "That same news my own spies will bring me tomorrow from the city. What other reasons has she for calling herself our equal? I say, let her kill the Earthman and go back to the harem where she belongs."

There was a rising of voices around the fire, some few in agreement, most deprecating not so much the sentiment as the crude way in which it had been put. The true Venusian prefers his malice more deftly expressed.

Quanna faced them equably. Showing no resentment—it did not behoove a woman to resent openly anything a man might say—she declared in a voice pitched low:

"To us in the city it doesn't look so simple, lord. With the right knowledge, we may glean much from the Earthmen before they go."

The scarred hillman pounded his velvet knee with a clenched fist. "I say fight as we planned!" he roared. "Fight and conquer and loot, before they can get away from us! It was good enough for our fathers, wasn't it? What do we want a new plan for? Kill and loot, and all this waiting be damned!"

A babble of voices echoed him around the fire, cut off in a moment by the brilliant scarlet of Vastari's leap, his red cloak streaming. There was a flash of glittering colors in one swift arc and a thud of weapon on flesh, all too quick for the eye or the brain to follow clearly.

Then Vastari was standing over the huddled hillman, the scarlet cloak settling in bright folds about him and his wickedly jewel-studded blackjack swinging ready for another blow. The hillman nursed his smashed nose, blood running down beneath his hand to spatter upon apricot velvet.

Vastari's eyes glittered dangerously up at the rest under lowered brows as he stood above the silenced rebel, head sunk between his shoulders. The bloody blackjack swung in short, twitching arcs that caught the firelight in jeweled glints.

"Has Ystri any friends here?" he demanded softly. No one spoke. Vastari bent and deliberately slapped Ystri's face twice, heavy blows that rocked his head. The hillman was nearly twice Vastari's size, but he made no move to retaliate, only crouched there masking his broken nose behind a bunched hand and glaring up with reluctant respect in his eyes.

The same respect showed in every subdued face around the fire as Vastari turned away with a certain swagger, hooking the blackjack back in his belt, careless of the blood smear upon his satin tunic.

"This isn't the way to freedom," Vastari said, reseating himself beside Quanna. "If we quarrel among ourselves, we'll go the way so many went before us. We're no guerrilla band, squabbling for loot! Freedom is worth a little sacrifice today if we can take all Venus tomorrow! It was not under slavery that Earthmen conquered their empire. They were free men, fighting for themselves. We must be free, too, if we can hope to conquer Venus. Free of Earth rule and free of all petty greeds among ourselves. We aren't children, snatching at toys. We're free-born leaders fighting to drive Earthmen off our soil and rule Venus under Venusian law."

The fire of the crusader kindled in Vastari's voice as he went on. "If Ystri had his way, he'd attack Darva and die. The Earthmen have weapons we can't hope to conquer. And even if we did—what would happen? Ystri and his kind would loot and run back to the mountains, each to his separate stronghold, each with all he could carry. And presently each would envy his neighbor's loot, and in a little while you'd all be back where I found you, little nations too busy with your petty squabbles to unite against Earth rule or the raiders from Darkside or anything else that threatens you. Fools like Ystri made Earth tyranny possible on Venus. Fools like Ystri will bring it on us again if they ever return, unless I can unite us all. Union and freedom! Think of it, men!"

Vastari stood up and began to pace the shining floor with long, nervous strides. The heads of his hearers turned to follow him as if hypnotized. His voice shook and glowed with his passionate sincerity, and the bright light of avarice kindled in the eyes that followed his pacing.

"I tell you, it will be worth fighting for! We must be rid of the Earthman, but we mustn't ruin ourselves to drive him out. There will be much to do after he's gone—leaving his weapons behind him. We must have those weapons! We can't conquer Venus without them. And that's why Quanna must go back to Darva and learn more of their plans. Somehow, we must possess what the Earthmen now possess, if we intend to rule Venus as they did. That will take courage—cunning and courage. And after that—" Vastari paused, looking up into the glittering shadows of the ceiling with eyes that saw something far away and wonderful. "After that—freedom and Venus will be ours! The Earthmen fought for freedom long ago—and won it and conquered the stars with it! Our turn is next. When the Earthmen were first fighting against tyranny they sang an old battle song whose words might be our own. Quanna learned it from her Earthman. I'd like you all to hear it. Quanna—"

She bent her smooth fair head becomingly and began in a low, clear voice to chant as well as she could in Venusian to the tune of a very old drinking song of Earth, once the battle anthem of a nation that had fallen long ago. The listening men sat silent, firelight glittering in their eyes. It was a curious scene; surely the song had never been sung in a stranger setting than this crystalline ice cavern with its pale, sparkling shadows, to these wolfish men in the gorgeously colored robes.

"Oh, thus be it ever when free men shall stand
Between their loved homes and the tyrant's oppression,"

sang Quanna. Vastari's fanatic young face lighted up at the words; his lips moved soundlessly, mouthing them.

"Then conquer we must,
For our cause, it is just,
And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust!'
And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!"

Behind the group the gray Martian listened enigmatically, his leathery face sad.

Jamie Douglas wakened to a room translucent with the blue twilight of the ebbing cloud-tide. His mind was clear and relaxed for a moment, as tranquil as the twilight in the room. Then memory came back, and the familiar heaviness of spirit, and he sat up slowly, the crease deepening between his black brows. Quanna sat by the window where the breeze just lifted her fine, pale hair. When she heard him stir she turned, tranquillity in every gentle motion she made.

"How well you slept," she murmured, rising. "I couldn't bear to wake you, Jamie, you were so soundly asleep. You must have been very tired, dear."

He leaned forward on the edge of the couch, forearms crossed on knees so his big shoulders hunched. He looked up at her under his brows rather as Vastari had looked up in the crystal cavern, but with all the difference in the world in his dark, weary face.

"I had a dream," he said somberly. "I thought I was back in Norristown, at the edge of the Twilight Belt, and the mountaineers were attacking. I thought a spear went through me, right here—" He laid a hand on his tunic just above the belt buckle. "It was so real it still hurt for a moment after I woke up. But in the dream it didn't hurt at all. I thought it nailed me to the wall, and I pulled it out and—" He laughed and hesitated. "Dreams are silly things. I thought I led a charge brandishing that bloody spear, and we drove the attackers back." He laughed again, but looked up at her under the black brows with a dark and somber gaze, no laughter in his eyes.

Quanna shivered a little under her blue-green gown. "Don't look at me like that," she said lightly. "It was only a dream. Wouldn't you like some coffee, Jamie dear? You missed dinner, you know."

He ignored the question. "What was it you were playing before I fell asleep? 'Otterburn,' wasn't it?" He hummed the tune, and words came back to his memory.

"Oh, I have dreamed a dreary dream
Beyond the Isle of Skye;
I saw a dead man win a fight,
And I think that man was I—"

"The Isle of Skye," he repeated after a long moment. "I wonder! The old Isle of Skye's on Earth, but you and I are on a new one now, Quanna. From Earth, wouldn't Venus be the Isle of Skye?"

She shook her head, the fine hair clouding about her face. "I can't picture it at all. Stars! Shall I ever see them, Jamie?"

"Not from Venus. And Earth's no safe place to be just now, my dear. No, you're safer on your Isle of Skye. As for me—" He shook his black head. "Now if I believed in dreams as my people used to do, I'd take that one for an omen." He stood up. "Did you say something about coffee? Lord, how I must have slept!"

Quanna's smile as she rose had the clarity of uttermost innocence. When she opened the door the tall figure standing there with knuckles lifted to knock made her jump a little.

"Lieutenant!" she laughed. "You startled me."

"Commander here?" Lieutenant Morgan, second in command at Darva Post, gave her an impassive stare from sleepy, brown eyes.

"Come in, Morgan," called Jamie from the room beyond. "All right, Quanna. Run along and bring that coffee."

Morgan entered with the loose-jointed, deceptive laziness that colored everything he did.

"Don't like that girl," he said, looking at the closed door under his lids.

Jamie laughed. "You don't like any Venusian."

"Damn right I don't. You'll wake up with a knife in your ribs some day, commander."

Douglas said: "Not Quanna's knife."

"Think not?" Morgan shrugged. "By the way, Vastari was up in the hills last night." He glanced out of the window toward the great leaning cliffs above Darva, where the light was broadening as the morning cloud-tide thinned. A long rumble of rockslide shook the window frames as he spoke.

"Attack?" asked Jamie.

"No, just a powwow. They're up to something, commander."

"Oh, I suppose so. They usually are. Any ideas?"

"Two to one they know we're leaving. That means ambush somewhere on the way out."

"Or attack here?"

Morgan shook his head. "Too risky. Vastari's no fool."

"Maybe not open attack. But they'll hate to see us leaving with all our artillery. Vastari'd like that for his campaigns in the mountains. He'll try to get it, and he'll try hard."

"Preferably by foul means," put in Morgan with a grin. "He—"

A gentle tap at the door interrupted him. Quanna looked in deprecatingly.

"A caller, commander," she said. "The Martian trader, Ghej—"

Jamie stood up quickly. "Ghej! Come in, come in! It's good to see you. Quanna, how about coffee for us all?"

The cloaked gray figure came in with the odd little shuffle in his gait that is so typically Martian. Jamie had a sudden Scots premonition that vanished in a moment and left him deriding himself, but in that moment the gray-robed figure had looked like Death shuffling in to greet him, holding out its hand. He remembered his dream, and the buried Celtic credulity of his forebears rose into the light just long enough for him to wonder if he were to leave Venus after all, if his longing to stay were to be granted more grimly than he had bargained for. The Isle of Skye, the morning star—

"I saw a dead man win a fight,
And I think that man was I—"

"Superstitious fool!" he apostrophized himself half angrily, and held out his hand to Ghej.

"I would not have liked to miss you, commander," said the Martian in his precise English, accepting the chair Morgan pushed forward. "I hear you are leaving Venus soon."

Jamie threw up his hands in a gesture of despair. "Half Venus seems to have heard about it already."

Ghej's pointed upper lip drew down in his beaklike smile. "I have been liquidating my assets for over a year now," he told them, "preparing for this day." The smile grew one-sided and twisted down a bit sadly at the corners. With his left hand he made the crook-sign of ancient Mars in the air. "Remember?" he asked. "It happened to Mars, too. I know about Rome and America and the other great fallen empires of Earth. I could see this coming from a long way off. As you could see it, commander."

There was unconscious sadness in Jamie's own smile. "Officially this is known as 'temporary consolidation,'" he told the Martian. Ghej lifted deprecating brows and pulled the long upper lip down in a grimace. He was too polite to say what all three men in the room were thinking.

This is the end of the Solar Empire of Earth. This is the last Patrol, out of all the strong network that once bound the worlds to-

gether by unbreakable chains of men. The links are loosening; the Empire is falling apart. Earth evacuates the planet it has ruled for three hundred years. The Green Star of Earth is an outworn emblem now. Barbarian hordes from the outer world are pouring down upon the Imperial Planet, armed with the weapons Earth taught them to make, that Earth might be destroyed. Little by little her grasp has let go. One by one the Patrols go home to defend the mother world. This is the last.

"Venus will be a different world without you," said Ghej, smoothing his cloak over one knee. "It will be interesting to see what happens to the Terrestrialized cities—all the clean, broad streets, the markets, the busy shops—how long will they last?"

"Just as long as it takes Vastari to burn them," Morgan declared bitterly.

Ghej nodded. "Vastari probably justifies himself in his own mind. They say he has reason to hate Earth, you know. He'll want to destroy everything on Venus that has a Terrestrial background."

"Three hundred years of Earth rule," mused Jamie. "Three hours in the life of the race! Sometimes I wonder if twenty centuries would have been enough to make an impression on these people. Sometimes I wonder if everything we've done on Venus hasn't been wholly in vain for both worlds. Six months after we've gone, the Terrestrialized cities will be gone, too. What the fire leaves the jungles will take over. Cementine huts will rise where cementine huts stood three hundred years ago, and there won't be a trace left of anything Earthmen tried to do. No more cities where children can grow up in safety. No more protection for the farms that provide against starvation in famine seasons. Oh, damn Vastari!"

"He can't help being a Venusian," said Ghej mildly.

Jamie slapped his chair arms with impatient palms. "I know. It's just that—well, I've been on Venus a long time now. I fought at the second siege of Norristown when I was twenty. I flew with Cressy when he explored the Twilight Belt. Here at Darva I've seen the city grow into something to be proud of. I got the appropriations myself to build the storehouses that tided three whole tribes over the last famine season. When I think of Vastari wiping it all out the moment my back's turned, I could strangle him with my bare hands!"

"The Venusians are like quicksilver, commander," Ghej said thoughtfully. "They slip away from contact with the logic of other worlds."

"I know. It's because they're still barbarians, isn't it? Perhaps they'll always be barbarians. They have no words in any of their languages for 'loyalty' or 'honor' or any of the high-sounding ideals we live by. They have no values above the selfish animal values of survival. They're incapable of civilized thoughts as we define civilization. I tell you, Venus is stagnant already, for all her rawness. There's barbarism at both ends of the social scale, you know, and the men of Venus have gone from one barbarism to the other with no interval of true civilization between." Jamie slapped the chair arms again.

"Think of Norris, colonizing Venus. Can you imagine any Venusian enduring such hardships, simply for an ideal? Remember the first siege of Norristown? The colonists could have taken ships for home any time that year, and abandoned Venus and everything Norris and his men died to establish. But they didn't. They stuck it out until the rescue ships came, a whole year late. Did you ever read the story of that siege, Ghej? Unceasing attack from the swamps and the seas, unceasing fevers and disease from the unknown plagues of Venus. But the colonists had a greater fever than anything Venus could inflict—the feverish dream of empire that was sweeping the Solar System then.

"The soldiers died on the walls one by one, and the civilians took up the battle. When the spaceship came in at last with provisions, they found the women and children, the invalids and the wounded manning the guns, and not one able-bodied fighting man left on his feet.

"That burning idealism has no roots in Venusian minds. And yet, you know, there's something irresistibly fascinating about the planet and the people. It's raw and lusty. It's the future. Venus from Earth is the morning star, and I think that's more than symbolism now."

Jamie got up and walked to the window, looking out over the roofs of Darva toward the tremendous blue mountains where the cloud-tide thinned to let brightening daylight through.

"Back on Earth I'll be a misfit. An outlander. Earth is a world of orderly gardens and tamed seas and landscaped mountain ranges. The people are set in a pattern. You know to a syllable just how they'll react to a given situation. It makes you yawn to think of it when you've spent twenty years on Venus under these gigantic mountains, where the people are as wild and unpredictable as the cloudbursts.

"I've forgotten the polite formulas of Earth that cover every possible situation. They've got a tight little society there and I won't fit into it anywhere."

Jamie was silent, and for a long moment no one spoke. Jamie's mind went on:

"Not that it matters how Earth accepts any of us colonials. I have an idea we've seen the last of our little play-paradises with their formal rules. They don't tell us much here on Venus, but the last news I heard was of barbarian bases spotted through Earth like a plague, and barbarian invaders pouring down out of the sky in ships we taught them how to build, with weapons we put into their hands many years ago."

He couldn't say that aloud, not even to Morgan. Certainly not to an outworld trader, however well he knew Ghej. He couldn't say what had burned in his mind for so many months now, the terrible fear that had come to him and to the civilized world generations too late to save it.

For the era of civilized man was ending. Jamie almost wished he hadn't had the leisure to see it coming. He wished he hadn't read the old books, for he could see the cycle closing as it had closed for other cultures long ago.

"They say we're 'temporarily consolidating,' " he thought, staring out at the great cloud-marbled mountains. "I know better. I've got a perspective here they don't have at home, or won't admit having. I know the signs of rottenness, and the signs are plain on Earth. It'll take a better race than modern man to win back what we're letting go.

"And there is no such race. The Venusians might have done it—but they won't now. Another few centuries and we might have instilled some conception of what idealism means into those slippery quicksilver minds. I don't know. We'll never do it now. And the Venusians were our last hope.

"No other race remains. The barbarians who are conquering Earth are decadent barbarians. The other worlds of the empire are either old civilizations, more tired even than we, or subhuman tribes which no amount of teaching could lift much above apehood.

"And so the greatest empire that mankind ever knew is crumbling from within, without a hope of rebirth."

The strong fragrance of coffee entering the room like a tangible presence broke the little silence that had fallen upon the three men. Quanna came in smiling, followed by servants with trays. Her deep, quiet eyes saw everything readable on the faces before her, though no eyes caught her looking. She poured the coffee deftly.

When she handed Ghej his cup she set a small silver platter of bread at his elbow, according to the ceremonious Venusian custom, observed even among outworld people on Venus. There, as on Earth, bread symbolizes the staff of life, and guests are served with it whenever food is served and whether they intend to taste it or not.

Ghej's horny-lidded eyes flickered at the plate and then slanted a glance up at Quanna. She caught it wonderingly. Something was afoot, then. Something concerning Jamie, for in the elaborate symbolism which governs all Venusian living, bread is the emblem for leader or head of the household.

"I think you misunderstand Vastari, commander," said Ghej, sipping his coffee. "It's true that no Venusian seems to comprehend what other worlds call idealism. But, in his own mind, Vastari is probably quite sure of his rightness. He talks of freedom, you know."

"Freedom to loot and burn, and starve afterward!"

"Perhaps," Ghej nodded, and began to toy with the silver knife that lay across the bread platter. "I think so. But then I represent the past, gentlemen. My world died millenniums ago. You yourselves are the present; your world is passing. Vastari is the future. What he does with it only the future can show. You and I will not be here to see." He shook his crested head and picking up the knife, drove it idly halfway through the loaf of bread beside him. Under the horny lids he flickered a glance up at Quanna.

"As a trader among the mountain tribes, commander," he remarked irrelevantly, "it has been my business for many years to fathom Venusian mentalities as nearly as any outworlder can. I've seen a hillman, for instance, take revenge for a blow by striking not at his attacker but at his attacker's enemy, in the dead of night. None but a Venusian could clearly understand the tangle of motives behind such a revenge—

"Excellent coffee, my dear Quanna. May I have another cup?"

In the blue twilight of Jamie's bedroom nothing moved but the softly blowing curtains. Jamie's regular, hoarse breathing was the only sound except for an occasional, far-away thunder of rockslide and the receding footsteps of the sentry who paced outside the commander's quarters.

Jamie's sleep was deep. Quanna had seen to that with the night-cap she had served him. Now she sat in the farthest corner of the room, where the shadows hung as blue as if in some submarine cavern, far down under Venusian seas. She sat in perfect stillness, unwinking eyes fixed upon the window beyond which the shadow and the footsteps of the sentry passed and repassed.

She was grateful to Ghej. She was not sure how he could have guessed about her feeling for the commander, but she knew he had guessed. He was fit, almost, to be a Venusian in his sensitive perception of nuances. She knew, too, how it had amused him to tell her by symbolism and indirection under the very noses of an oblivious audience that Ystri planned to murder Jamie. Yes, Ghej had lived long enough on Venus to think almost like a Venusian himself.

As she waited here in the twilight for the assassin she was not unduly perturbed. She knew enough of her race in general and Ystri in particular to be sure he would come alone. He could not wholly trust any coplotter not to betray him to Vastari, and he would want the glory alone if he succeeded.

The sentry's feet gritted up and down on the pavement outside; Jamie's heavy breathing measured the silence in the room. Quanna sat unwinking and waited.

She could not have said what warned her when the time came. Certainly no sound. But when the sentry's tread approached the far end of his beat and a shadow slid up to the thin grille that masked the windows, Quanna was at the grille and crouching low against it before the shadow itself was aware of her. It must have been something of a shock to the newcomer to find a second figure six inches away just inside the screen. The shadow started back with a muffled gasp.

Quanna breathed, "Ystri—look!" and let the light from the gateway shine for an instant on the snub-nosed gun she held.

"Quick!" whispered Ystri, speaking indistinctly because of his injured nose. "Let me in! The sentry—"

"No." Quanna's voice was flat. "I know what you want. Not tonight, Ystri."

"Let me in," Ystri demanded fiercely, "or the commander will know tomorrow that you are a spy."

Quanna thought he meant that. His prestige had been severely damaged by Vastari's blow; he might do anything to discredit her and Vastari through her.

"Not tonight," she temporized. "I have plans— Afterward, you may kill him."

"I don't trust you!"

"Tomorrow—"

"Traitress!" hissed Ystri. "Let me in! With him dead, there'll be confusion enough to steal weapons, even take the town! In Vastari's name, let me in!"

"Not tonight! Tomorrow I'll prove myself—kill him if you can, then. But not here."

"Where then? You're lying."

"It's the truth. Tomorrow I'll bring him into a trap for you. The mangrove forest, say? At cloud-ebb tomorrow?"

Ystri peered at her doubtfully in the blue dimness through the grille. The sentry's returning feet grew louder on the pavement, but Ystri hesitated for one last mistrustful moment.

"Is this the truth? Do you swear it by Vastari?"

"I swear. I'll bring him into the mangrove forest tomorrow, to kill if you can."

Ystri scowled at her in the twilight, seeing a certain sincerity upon her face that made him accept the promise reluctantly. That, and the gun gleaming dully in reflected light.

"Tomorrow at cloud-ebb, then—or you both die," he growled, and his shadow melted from the grille without a sound. Quanna sat back on her heels and looked after him, her eyes deep and expressionless.

"The mangrove forest?" Jamie's voice was doubtful, but he turned his horse toward the upward path. "That gloomy place? Sure you want to ride that way?"

Quanna smiled at him under her hood of emerald velvet. "You said I could choose—and it's our last ride together on Venus, Jamie dear."

"Oh, all right. I always get my feet wet there, but—have it your way."

"I think it's a lovely place, Jamie. Listen, Jamie, I'll sing to you—a going-away song."

The Martian monochord harp hung at her saddle. She laid it across her green velvet knee and began a soft Venusian chant with a ringing call at the end of each stanza. Partly it was to amuse Jamie, partly to warn the hiding Ystri of their coming. It would amuse Ystri too, in a grim sort of way, for this was a going-away song indeed, a Venusian dirge for a man about to die.

The mangrove forest lay high in a narrow canyon above Darva. Jamie and Quanna had ridden here more than once before, for the pleasure of walking the narrow mossy ways that wound over the water. The forest filled a valley between peaks veined with waterfalls whose music tinkled all around the canyon. It was half swamp, half lake of clear dark water out of which gigantic mangroves rose in arches and columns and long green aisles. The labyrinthine paths wound intricately over the great gnarled roots which stood above the water.

The glassy surfaces gave back such faithful reflections that the forest seemed double, suspended in green space. It was like walking in a dream to stroll along the winding, mossy ways and watch one's own reflection swimming dimly underfoot.

Not even the padding Venusian horses could walk these paths. Jamie and Quanna dismounted at the mouth of the canyon and entered the glassy forest in silence except for the music Quanna stroked now and again from her harp. She was watching for Ystri. He would not be easy to see, she knew. It was not for nothing that she had worn her green cloak today, and he was certain to be green-clad, too, and almost invisible in the bewildering reaches of the forest.

They had strolled a long way into the mirrory labyrinth before a sliding motion among the trees caught Quanna's eye. She had been sure he would come alone, and she could see now that she had not been mistaken. She had been sure, too, that he would not use a gun. He wanted Jamie dead for many reasons. The chiefest was to forestall Vastari of the glory of that murder, and Ystri would want to use the long Venusian dagger for that pleasure. And so he would have to creep close enough to stab Jamie in the back, and there was no danger of a random shot across the water.

But Ystri was wary. Jamie had an evil reputation among the outlaws and Ystri was not one to risk having this particular quarry turn to face him before his blow drove home. Quanna had to lead the way deeper and deeper into the forest, where the great mangrove roots made paths broad enough so that no reflections showed in the water, before the green moving shadow that was Ystri drew near.

If Quanna's heart was beating harder under her emerald robe, no hint of it showed in her face when she decided the time was near to do what must be done.

"I've a surprise for you, Jamie dear," she said, pausing to face him under a great vaulting arch of green. "Will you wait for me a moment here? I'll be back in five minutes." And then, because the danger was near and great just then, she tiptoed and took his dark face between her hands and kissed him quickly on the mouth.

Venusians are not demonstrative people. Jamie stared after her as she turned swiftly away, the green robe swirling. Her long, dark look and the unexpected kiss had carried an air of foreboding that made him loosen the gun in his belt and watch the forest around him with vague uneasiness, for no tangible reason. And that result, perhaps, Quanna had foreseen, too, when she kissed him. There are double motives behind most of the things Venusians do.

Quanna went swiftly, on soundless feet, along a pathway that twisted out of sight. Her green reflection went with her in the water, smooth and stealthy. She was making a circle as directly as possible in these winding ways, and in a few moments she saw ahead of her another green and stealthy figure moving forward from tree to tree. Quanna smiled.

Jamie had lighted a cigarette. In the glassy stillness the click of his lighter was audible from far away, and the pungency of the smoke spread through the heavy fragrances of the water jungle. She could see his dark head down an aisle of greenness; he had set his back to a tree and was smoking desultorily, flicking ashes into the water and watching the spreading circles that they made.

Ahead of her the green shadow of Ystri slipped forward with a sudden rush, quick and deadly. A knife caught the light and glinted.

Quanna covered the distance at a soft-footed run which the moss hushed. Her green cloak unfolded like a hover of wings behind her and the flash from beneath it rose an instant before the glimmer of steel in Ystri's fist rose.

There is no sound quite like the solid thud of a dagger driven hilt-deep into flesh, hard, with a full-armed swing. Jamie knew it from all other sounds and had spun with his gun in his hand before Ystri himself knew quite what had happened to him. Ystri must at first have felt only the heaviness of the blow which even from behind was hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. He gasped once for air, and whirled to face Quanna, open-mouthed.

His face contorted with fury when he realized what had happened and his second gasp was for the breath to betray her, but she had struck deftly and a gush of bright blood, startlingly bright, smothered the words on his lips.

There was no need for explanations. Jamie holstered his gun slowly, seeing that he would not need it. Quanna's expressionless eyes watched Ystri fall, the glare of fury in his eyes to the last as he mouthed futilely against the torrent of blood frothing over the apricot velvet tunic which his green robe fell back to reveal. There were old bloodstains there, too. It was the same tunic he had worn in the cavern. She thought briefly that the blood-letting which her brother had begun two days ago the sister had finished here.

Jamie was staring at her questioningly over the body. It lay with one arm dragging in the water; Quanna put out her foot and rolled it over without emotion. It slid into the water with scarcely a splash and the mirrory surface closed over the brilliant colors of apricot and green, bright fresh scarlet and the brown of old blood. Above the spreading circles Quanna looked up to Jamie and smiled.

"I have saved your life, Jamie," she said.

He bit his lip. Lives are not saved gratuitously on Venus. It is a matter of investment, done deliberately with a specific price in mind, and among Venusians if the price is refused the life is forfeit, then and there or at any time thereafter, without penalty of a blood-feud from the victim's relatives. This relentless code is as near, perhaps, as Venusians come to maintaining an abstract ideal about anything at all.

"I suppose there's no use asking what's behind all this," said Jamie, nodding at the water which had closed over Ystri's body.

Quanna lifted a brow. "Oh, that. I saw him—I had a favor to ask of you. Is there a better way to buy it than this?"

He knew he would never be told any more of the story than that. No use asking. He lifted his shoulders resignedly.

"You saved my life," he acknowledged. "What to you want?"

"To go back to Earth with you," she told him promptly. "You'll take me, Jamie?"

He squinted a curious glance at her. She might have asked for money, weapons, anything but an intangible like this. An intangible he could not give her.

"Quanna," he said gently, "don't you think I'd take you if I could?"

"You are commander. What can stop you?"

"Look, dear." He stepped forward over the bloodstains on the moss and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Earth's a . . . an armed camp. No one's safe there now. You never saw cities bombed—you can't imagine the life you'd have to lead if you came back with me."

"I'm not a child, Jamie." She lifted unfathomable dark eyes to his.

"I know—I know." He tried helplessly to make her understand. "But I'm not going home for pleasure, Quanna. I'm going to fight. I think we'll have to go on fighting there as long as . . . as long as we can. If I took you along, you'd be in constant danger. There'd be forced march after forced march, front-line duty—life under siege at the very best. And at worst—without me, what would become of you?"

"I'm willing to risk all that, Jamie dear."

He let his hands fall. "I can't, Quanna. Even if I could let you risk it, I'm not free to handicap myself with a woman. I'm going home to fight, my dear. Don't you understand? Earth is calling us back because of desperate need. I'm a soldier of the Imperial Planet—I have no right to divide my efficiency in half because I've a woman to look out for everywhere I go—"

"But why must you go at all, Jamie?" She said it very gently. "What can one man mean among so many? Why not stay here on Venus, with me?"

His black brows met above the crooked nose.

"If I could make you understand that, my dear," he said wryly, "I wouldn't half so much mind going."

And so it went on, for a long while. To Quanna the words that Jamie used were often as meaningless as the motives behind them. She wondered afterward that she had not used the dagger which tradition gave her the right to use, upon this dark and stubborn Terrestrial who was so intent upon destroying her happiness and his own.

Long and hotly they debated, standing over the bloodstain on the moss with the forest glassily quivering all around them. When they turned home at last along the reflecting pathways, Quanna went submissively, her hooded head bent at the angle suitable to a Venusian woman in the presence of her lord, but she had not surrendered.

She would have to change her plan; that was all. If he would not take her of his free will, then she would force him to it. She would find some lever stronger than the one which had just failed her. For he knew and she knew that she would not take the life she had saved. She had not killed Ystri for that.

Yes, she would find a lever, and she would have no mercy in her use of it, for it would take some intolerable force indeed to swerve Jamie from his course.

When the blue twilight was deepest over Darva and the Terrestrialized city slept, Quanna went up the winding stair which led to the roof of the commander's quarters. It was the dark of the cloud-flow, but she carried no light. Artificial lighting is rare on Venus, which never knows true darkness on Dayside. Quanna moved unerringly through the blue gloom upon the roof.

She carried a sheaf of slender, hollow rods under her arm, and in one hand a basket of decaying flowers. The heavy, noxiously sweet fragrance of their dissolution is irresistible to several species of Venus' flying creatures, most of them poisonous.

Quanna jointed her hollow rods together until she had a long, slender pole, about whose upper end she twined garlands of the heavy-smelling, rotting blossoms, working deftly in the near-darkness. Darva was hushed below her. From the mountains behind her to the mountains before blew the fragrances of jungle canyons; and the rumble of rock-slides thundered from far away.

Darva was built like a medieval fortress, a walled plateau guarded by crenelated mural towers at regular intervals all around the city. The commander's quarters were built into the upper end of the wall, one with it, so that the roof upon which Quanna stood looked down sheerly over wall and plateau edge, toward the tremendous blue mountains beyond the river. She had taken refuge in a battlement and was waving her long, flower-twined pole in slow circles.

In an incredibly short time a whir of wings sounded in the deep, blue twilight and a night-flying shape swept out of the dimness toward the pole. Quanna braced herself against the battlement and continued to fish the air streams blowing toward the cliffs. More wings—more swooping, dim shapes out of the twilight as the cruising nocturnal creatures of the mountains began to catch that intoxicating odor on the wind. Presently she was the center of a whirling, dipping swarm of silent things, all making circles around the decayed flowers like moths around a light, all in the uttermost silence except for the beat of wings.

When she saw what she wanted, she lowered the pole until the flowery tip was within reach, and she put out an intrepid hand into the midst of the hovering creatures and seized a dark, winged horror by the neck. It beat at her furiously with scaled pinions a yard long, and its thick, muscular, serpent body lashed at her face. Composedly—she had handled the winged snakes since childhood—she put down the pole and went deftly to work over the threshing thing whose great blue-scaled wings winnowed the air. The blue, reptilian body wound and rewound about her forearms and venomous hissing punctuated the wing beats. Quanna paid no attention. Deadly poison though the winged snakes are, they can be safely handled by those who know how. This one bore a small, pale brand on its flat head as token that it had been handled before.

When Quanna tossed it into the air a moment later it shook outraged wings, dived at her once or twice with fierce hissings, and then hurled itself once more into the group still circling about the rotted blossoms on the pole.

Quanna went forward confidently, hesitated a moment, then reached out to seize another of the circling things out of the flutter and confusion around the flowers. This one she stroked with long, rhythmic motions until its scaled and writhing body quieted in hypnotized inertia and the great wings folded into stillness. She wrapped a scarf around them and then went forward to beat off the rest of the swarm and cover the flowers with her cloak.

In a few minutes, when the sick-sweet fragrance had dissipated upon the air, the noxious flying coven of poison things began to disband, great, dark shapes sailing and swooping out in widening circles until the blueness of the twilight swallowed them. Quanna smoothed her disheveled hair and began to dismantle her fishing rod.

She knew that when light began to broaden again over the mountains the branded flying snake she had released would return to its home in the cliff above the hidden fortress where she had been born. It would not be long before Vastari had the message she had bound beneath its blue-scaled wing.

And then—if Vastari trusted her enough—a certain species of hell would be unleashed upon the citadel which Jamie Douglas still held for Imperial Earth.

When the alarm sirens exploded into sudden, brazen wailing over Darva one twilight two days later, Quanna knew that Vastari still trusted her. She stood by Jamie's mirror, watching him buckle on the cuirass without which no one dared walk the battlements when Venusian spearmen were below, and her dark gaze was somber.

Jamie, ducking into the breast-armor, was as excited as she could remember seeing him. A Venusian attack was always exciting; the rippling drums and the shrill, high keening of the seven-toned pipes get into the listeners' blood and quicken the heartbeats in time with that wild, tuneless rhythm. Venusians do not shout in battle. The pipes and drums are the only sounds of attack, clear, inhuman music as if not men but something wild and rhythmic were attacking the city.

"Damned fools," declared Jamie, struggling with the straps of his cuirass. "Here, help me, Quanna. Attacking with spears and slings—must be something behind this. Recognize any of 'em Quanna? Is Vastari there? Lord, I'd like to see him over a Knute before I go!"

Her eyes veiled. "You hate him, Jamie?"

"Hate?" He paused to look at her, smiling a little grimly. "Well, hardly that. He's a symbol, Quanna—a symbol of barbarism. If I could see him dead before I go, I'd be sure of one enemy less against Venusian civilization. Him and his babble about freedom!" Jamie snorted. "There might be safety a little longer for the people we leave behind if Vastari should die this evening. Well—" He shrugged and swung away. Quanna followed him smoothly, her satin skirts whispering along the floor as she walked.

They stepped out into the cool evening light, into a subdued, hushed murmur of activity. Except for the shrill, inhuman rhythm of the music outside, even battle, on Venus, was—hushed. And the music was dying now as the attackers went grimly into action.

Lieutenant Morgan was waiting by the Armory door, a file of armed Earthmen with him. The great, solid block of the Armory, and the lower walls of Darva, were the work of Earthmen's hands only and their secrets known only to Terrestrials. The Armory—heart and brain of Earth domination—was unlocked only in the presence of the commanding officer, and it was not unlocked with keys. There was no chance that Venusians might gain access to this vital ganglion of defense, or Quanna would not have resorted to this last dangerous expedient of inviting attack that the Armory be opened to her.

There was no hope even of tricking the guarded combination of the door out of the few officers who knew it, for strictly speaking, it was unknown even to them. The elaborate precautions that guarded that secret were eloquent of its importance. It had been implanted in the subconscious minds of a very few Terrestrials while under the influence of neo-curare.

Morgan had just finished making a hypodermic injection into the arm of one of his men as Quanna and Jamie came up. Neo-curare, dulling the conscious mind, releasing the subconscious—

"Ready?" asked Jamie crisply.

Morgan glanced at his watch. "Ready, sir." He slid aside a tiny panel in the door, uncovering a dial. The hands of the drugged soldier hid it; his dulled eyes did not change, but his fingers began to move as Morgan said: "Armory combination." This was the effective lock that guarded Earth weapons, the lock for which no key could be stolen.

Even if Vastari could have kidnaped one of the key men, neither he nor any Venusian knew the ingredients of the drug or the proper dosage to administer. Yes—an effective lock. But not wholly proof against traitors, Quanna told herself as she watched the weapons being brought out with rapid efficiency.

One of the Knute vibrators was being taken out of the Armory now. It looked like a thick, closed umbrella. The crew of four—three to operate, one to aim—handled the yard-long device with the carelessness born of long practice. Quanna had watched that practice more than once, from hiding places that only Venusians knew.

The Knute vibrator was a device attuned to the delicate vibrations of the brain, a wave-thrower that could disrupt the molecules of the mind, causing a mental explosion that resulted in death. Quanna had learned the simple devices that operated it during her first weeks in Darva. More important, she had learned of the safety device, the vitally significant Gilson inert fuse. Eavesdropping in the violet twilight one evening she had heard Lieutenant Morgan excoriate a crew for testing the vibrator with the inert fuse in place.

"It's the difference between bullets and blanks," his angry voice had floated up to her out of the practice yard. "Once you put the Gilson in, you've got dynamite in your hands." There had been much more, and Quanna remembered it faithfully.

Without the inert fuse, the Knute vibrator was not deadly. It threw off a vibration that had the same effect as inaudible sound, causing reasonless confusion and terror in its victims. Dangerous wild beasts could be driven off by its use, or killed with the Gilson inert fuse in place.

Quanna followed the crew that carried a Knute to the wall. They wore the usual outfit of wall defenders, metal cuirasses, helmets, face masks with heavily glassed goggles swinging at their belts.

"There is dust on your lenses, men," she said, pointing to the nearest mask.

The soldiers grinned down at her, a little flattered by the notice that she usually reserved entirely for the commander. Quanna reached for a mask and polished the eyepieces with a corner of the rainbow scarf that veiled her hair.

"You may need to see clearly soon," she told them with a serene upward glance. "Let me have your mask, soldier. . . . Thank you."

Afterward she fell back and watched the men move up to the battlemented tower top and unfold the vibrator. She was not smiling; it had been easy enough, but she did not feel like smiling this evening. The masks were well rubbed now with a secretion from certain spider-like insects of the high mountains. Like some Terrestrial creatures, the arachnid paralyzes its victims so that its larvae can feed at leisure. It is the fumes that paralyze, and they would work swiftly after the men had donned their masks and body-heat released the poison for the mucous eye membrane to absorb.

After that, paralysis, instant and effective. But paralysis of the body, not the brain. Because of that, Quanna knew that her hours in Darva were numbered.

She paused for a moment in the door of the commander's quarters to look back over Darva, which she might never see again. The walled city was in a hum of ordered activity as guns were rushed to the walls and defenders to positions in the mural towers. And always, she saw, it was Terrestrials who did the ordering, Venusians who scurried obediently into place. She could picture what Darva would look like in the first attack after the Earthmen left. Terror, confusion, inefficiency. She was not sure even in her own mind if she were glad for Vastari's sake or sorry for Jamie's that this should be so.

But there was no time now for loitering. She went in swiftly, moving on silent feet through the hurried confusion of indoors. There was a certain tapestry-hung angle of a hallway in which she paused while two servants hurried downstairs; then her fingers were flattening against the smooth surface behind the tapestry and a panel slid open without a sound. The Earthmen might suspect, but they could not know of the hidden passages which Venusian masons had built in Darva.

She went upward in darkness, even her cat-vision almost blind here. Halfway up she paused to find a long, scarf-wrapped bundle in a cubbyhole. The bundle squirmed faintly, giving off the musk scent of all night-flying things on Venus, where no definite evolutionary cleavage has ever been made between reptile and bird.

At the head of the dark stairs she found another panel, and a little slit of light widened in the wall. Blue twilight poured through, and the vague sounds of Venusian battle. She could hear the heart-quickening beat of the tripping drums below, the keening of the seven-toned pipes where Vastari's men were making a desperate effort to scale the walls before the Earthmen's invincible weapons could be turned upon them.

Quanna looked out on the turret where the Knute vibrator was being set up. From here it could rake the base of the walls with crossfire. The crew had not yet donned their masks, she saw. They were unfolding the umbrellalike weapon, till on a high tripod of meshed wires stood a conical torpedo of glass, mounted on a universal joint. From equidistant points at the base of the tripod wires led out to control boxes, each with a red push button.

"The Gilson," said one of the men, and was handed the inert fuse, a short, pencillike rod. Quanna watched him slip it into place. "Power."

A red button was pushed. The mesh base of the Knute began to quiver—but only one section of it. Slowly the wavelike motion spread out, till the whole section was shimmering like a veil.

"Now!"

The next man pushed his button. The shimmer crawled on to his section. Then the third—

Quanna noticed that whenever one of the panels slowed in its rippling dance, the guardian of that section pressed his button again, replenishing the power. The three men bent over their tasks. The fourth handled the aiming of the projector.

It was not difficult. Quanna could not see its effect from her position, but she read the faces of the men, and heard the shouts of Venusians from below the tower. A spear clattered against the battlement.

"Masks," one of the men said, and slipped his into place. The others obeyed. Quanna hugged the vaguely squirming bundle under her arm and waited tensely.

She did not have a long wait. At the end of it she stepped out onto the tower top, walking delicately among the inert but conscious men, lying awkwardly in the attitudes in which they had fallen, unable to stir or speak. They watched her with wide, glassy eyes.

She waited for the vibrations of the Knute to subside. The arms folded up into place easily enough and the device was not heavy to lift. As serenely as if the shocked and horrified men were not watching, she unwrapped her scarf from the great, scaled wings and serpent body of the flying creature she had captured several twilights ago. A harness was already buckled around it; she fastened the Knute into place as quickly as she could, for by now the silencing of this tower's defense must already have been noticed.

She tossed the freed serpent thing into the air. It hissed furiously and beat its broad, iridescent wings against the weight of the thing lashed to it. It would not fly far with that drag upon it, but there was no need of gaining distance now. Heedless of arrows, she leaned over the parapet to watch what happened.

Shouts rang out from below and from the wall defenders. Both sides had seen it now. Quanna held her breath. The flying snake was stronger than she had thought. It was carrying its burden out over the heads of the attackers, sinking slowly, but forging grimly ahead. Now it was clear of the last tower—and it was fluttering, confused falling. Another Knute had been focused upon it, she realized.

It dropped. A rush of Venusians, heedless of danger from above, closed over the threshing, scaly wings, hiding them from view. The pipes suddenly shrilled high and triumphantly. Quanna let her breath out in a long sigh.

Then Jamie's voice, clear and resonant, shouted: "They've got a Knute! Open the gates—"

She flattened herself to the wall, straining to see the little troop of Earthmen charging outward in a wedge toward the precious weapon. Quanna heard footsteps hurrying up the stairway toward her, but she did not move. Would Vastari obey? With this chance of killing Jamie—would he remember the surer plan and escape with the deadly vibrator?

No—not deadly. But Vastari would not know that. He would not guess the purpose of the Gilson inert fuse, or that Quanna had removed the little tube and hidden it. But as for Jamie—fighting forward toward the Knute—

A swarm of Venusians closed in between the Terrestrial wedge and the vibrator. She could not see clearly what was happening, and the footsteps were very close behind her now. She gave one last, despairing glance over the parapet and whirled toward her panel. The paralyzed Earthmen watched her go.

She was leaving few secrets behind her, she reflected as she hurried down the dark steps inside. When the gun crew recovered— But this had been the only way. And she must remain hidden now in some other of the secret places in the walls until she could escape after the gates were opened. It was a risky thing to trust Vastari with the weapon, but not even in peace time could she have walked out of Darva carrying a Knute; nor, of course, could she have captured the weapon except in the confusion and emergency of attack.

And this was only the beginning of the elaborate and cruel plan she had laid against Jamie. She should be thinking of that now, but she was not. She was seeing the battlefield as she had last glimpsed it, Jamie's bare, dark head forging forward among the attackers, and the pipes shrilling triumph. Briefly she remembered Jamie's ominous dream.

The rumble of a far-away landslide made slow thunder through the streets of Darva as Jamie stood in the door of his quarters, drawing on his gloves and watching the last Terrestrials upon Venus form into marching order down the street. He did not look up at the high blue mountains or out over the familiar roofs and terraces below. He would remember Darva, he knew, with an aching sort of memory that would last as long as he did. But he was not letting himself think at all. He was glad of Ghej beside him, to keep his mind turned outward.

"Sure you won't join us?" he asked for the last time, and again received the beaky smile and the headshake with which the old Martian had answered that question before.

"No, I'll stay. The Solar System isn't too good a place to live in these days, but I think Venus will be the least turbulent in our lifetime. It's the last refuge from the barbarians, anyhow. I don't expect them on Venus yet awhile, perhaps not during my life span—but they'll come, commander. They'll come." He pressed his lips together and squinted under his triangular, horny lids as if into a future he did not like at all. After a moment he shrugged. "No, I'll stay. I'm adjusted here well enough." He touched the small gun that showed at his belt when the gray robe swung back. "They respect me here."

Jamie smiled. He knew the old Martian was unexpectedly swift and accurate with that small weapon.

"You'll get along," he acknowledged, and then hesitated over a question he had to ask and dreaded. "Do you . . . have you— About Quanna, I mean—"

Ghej nodded. "Once I've seen her. In Vastari's camp. She's very unhappy, commander. Venusians seldom show emotion, but I know. I think you haven't seen the last of Quanna."

Jamie's black brows met. "Lord, I hope I have! Though even now, I can't quite believe she'd—" He let the sentence die. "I wish I could get my hands on Vastari before I leave!"

"Other leaders would rise in his place," Ghej shrugged. "What Venus really needs is—oh some common trouble to draw them all together. Here at the end, it just occurs to me that if the Terrestrials had really oppressed Venusians, it might have been the salvation of the race." He smiled dryly. "Too late now."

A horn sounded in the street below them. It was time to go.

The calm-faced Home Guard watched them marching away. There was a wild, curiously sad tempo to the music of the seven-toned pipes which played them out of Darva. Jamie saw the first shadow of decay even before they reached the gate. For the Home Guard, today, was not the fine line of soldiers he had reviewed last week. Nothing blatant, of course—just a tunic loosened at the throat, a helmet askew here, an unpolished buckle there, boots with dust on the toes— He looked away.

Another distant rockslide shook its low thunder through the air as they reached the gate. Jamie thought fancifully that the familiar, slow rumble was like the sound of the crumbling Solar Empire which was letting go its last world colony today. Behind them the wild, sad skirl of piping died away. Before them the road wound up through foothills toward the pass. And so the last legion rode out of Darva, not looking back.

Jamie thought they would all hear that skirling music until they died, and the long, low rumble of sliding rocks above peaceful Darva, and see the high blue mountains whenever they closed their eyes. These last Terrestrials had been a long time on Venus now.

There was decadence even in the marching of the Earthmen out of Darva, for a space port had once kept the city in touch with the outside worlds. It closed a year ago, when they moved the Seventeenth over nearer Darkside and the cost of the port became prohibitive. And so the last Terrestrial Patrol left Venus afoot, its officers mounted on padding horses, by a slow trade trail through the mountains over which Earth's ships had once glided on sleek wings.

Civilization had overreached itself in so many ways, thought Jamie. When the planes began to fail for lack of material from home, they had realized one serious gap, too late to bridge now. They had never needed surface transportation when the air was theirs, and now that the ships had failed—well, they tramped the roads as if their race had never mastered the drive of wheels.

Jamie was thinking inevitably of Quanna as they mounted the steep trail. He knew that one stolen Knute would not be enough to satisfy Vastari; there would be ambush somewhere along the way to the spaceport. He had come to personify in Vastari now all the qualities about Venus that irritated him most, and Quanna's shocking defection—he could scarcely believe even now that she had done what she had done—he, somehow, blamed Vastari, too, with the unreason of the subconscious. There was much he could not understand even yet; he was not sure he hoped more to see her or not to see her again before they left Venus.

The sheer, turquoise heights of the mountains were leaning above them now. They could look down, as they marched, over cloud-veiled distances at Darva showing and vanishing and showing again through gaps, each time farther away, smaller, more like a memory that recedes as time goes on.

Bright reptiles squirmed from their path, scaled, flying things swept more noiselessly than owls from their high nests as the Earthmen passed. The sound of falling water was all around them, and the low, shaking thunder of distant landslides.

It was a long journey over the mountain route toward the port. Somewhere along the way, Vastari must certainly strike in a last, desperate effort to take their weapons for himself. But, in spite of the difficulty and danger of the journey, Jamie thought none of them was wholly sorry that it was long. They were, for the last few days of their lives, alone in a high, blue world of turquoise rock beneath the slow surge of the cloud-tide, and all of them knew they were spending their last days on a world they loved and would not see again.

For none of them had any illusions about the world they were returning to. The barbarians of the outer worlds were, thought Jamie ruefully, the last plague that Earthmen would have to suffer, a latter-day Black Death which neither Earth civilization nor Earthmen would survive.

Suspense tightened as they drew nearer and nearer the end of their journey, and still Vastari had not struck. Jamie had fantastic dreams in which he thought Quanna had killed her brother to save the Earthmen, but his rational mind knew better. That she had had more than one motive in stealing the Knute he was sure, but he did not expect to feel pleasure when he learned what it was.

Darva was far behind. Each day that passed drove it farther and farther into memory. They all gave themselves up to the timeless present, knowing that each succeeding moment of peace might be the last. And still Vastari delayed.

There is a valley in the peaks a few hours this side of Port City. Countless tortuous ravines run up from its floor through the steep cliffs around. Earthmen did a little mining there in the old days, but nothing remains today except the great scars upon the cliff faces and the long, dark blasts the rocketships left—marks upon Venus that will far outlast the race that made them.

It was so obvious a place for ambush that Jamie had been fairly sure Vastari would not use it. That was probably one of the devious reasons behind the fact that he did.

Jamie, riding at the head of the column, eyed the labyrinth of ravines around him with wary eyes as they entered the valley. The ravines looked curiously confusing. There was a shimmer over the whole valley that reminded him suddenly of Mars. If he had not known himself on Venus, he would have thought that heat waves were dancing between the honeycombed walls of the valley.

Then the shimmer began to spread, and a violet blindness closed softly across Jamie's eyes; the sound of falling water from the peaks faded into a ringing silence, and the valley was full of terror and confusion. Little mindless horrors chased one another like ripples across his consciousness.

This was it. Even knowing that, it was incredibly hard to shout across his shoulder: "Knute helmets!" and fumble at his saddle for the limp pack of his own. The horse was beginning to shiver under him, though the Knute vibrations were still too high to do more than touch its animal brain. But for Jamie there was terror in everything, even in the feel of the helmet he was shaking out of its pack. He had to grind his teeth together to get the courage to pull it down over his head—he had the dreadful certainty that it would smother him when he did.

The soft, metallic cloth went on smoothly, its woven coils hugging his skull. There was a moment more of blindness and the unpleasant ringing silence that might be hiding all sorts of terrible sounds. Then something like a warmth in the very brain began to ooze inward from the helmet, and the world came back into focus.

His first conscious thought after that, as he tried to quiet his uneasy horse, was that the Knute had not been turned to killing power—yet. The helmets were protection against the lesser power of the vibrator, but they would not hold out long when the Gilson fuse turned the Knute into a death weapon. Before that happened they would have to find and silence it.

He swung his excited horse around, shouting commands in a voice that echoed thinly in his own ears through the helmet, knowing that though it would be a matter of moments to locate the source of the vibrations, storming it up these twisting ravines in the face of what might at any moment become deadly waves would be quite another matter.

Everything still shimmered a little—the hills, the waterfalls, the face of Morgan hurrying up to give him the location of the Knute.

"That ravine, sir," he said, squinting over his lifted arm. "Between the waterfalls, see?" His voice was thin and quivering through the helmet. There was a strangely dreamlike air to the whole scene, as there always was under the fire of a Knute. Everything seemed so unreal that it was hard to bring his mind seriously to bear upon the problem of attack.

It was probably in a dream that Jamie thought he saw Quanna come down the slanting valley, picking her way with delicate steps and holding her familiar green velvet cloak up to clear her scarlet shoes. She was carrying a white scarf like a flag.

Unexpectedly the rainbow shimmering of the Knute began to fade. The illusion of unreality trembled a moment longer over the valley and was gone, and Jamie blinked to see the illusion of Quanna still there, looking up at him diffidently under her emerald hood and holding the white scarf up like a banner.

He kicked his horse into a trot and went forward a little way to meet her, not at all sure what he would say when he did. He could feel Morgan's eyes on his back and was angrier at her just now for making him a fool before Morgan than for anything she had done before.

He reined in silently and sat looking down at her without a word. His black-browed scowl was forbidding. Quanna put all the delicate submissiveness she could summon into her voice. She was twisting the improvised white flag between her hands with a nervousness that might or might not be assumed.

"Lord, will you hear a message from Vastari?"

Her voice was very sweet. There had been a time when Jamie might have softened to hear it; lethargy was all that possessed him now. He said nothing, only nodded shortly.

"I have persuaded Vastari," she said, "that because I saved your life once and still hold an unfulfilled promise from you, and because you have had a warning already from the Knute, you will put down all your weapons if Vastari lets you go free to the spaceport."

Jamie laughed harshly. "How far do you think I trust Vastari—or you?"

"He could kill you," she reminded him in her sweet, reflective voice. "You and most of your men. The Knute is too well hidden to find soon, and too well barricaded to take in time, even if you found it. I know how weak the helmets are against the killing strength of the Knute. No, you must bargain, Jamie dear. But not with Vastari." She came forward with a lovely, swaying motion to lay both narrow pale hands upon his knee, tilting up her face.

"I can't let you go without me, Jamie dear." Her voice quivered as musically as a harp string. "This is the only way I know to make you listen. Jamie, if you take me back to Earth with you, I can save you from Vastari. No, listen!" Her fingers clasped his knee as she saw anger darken the face above her. "Listen, Jamie! If you won't listen for your own sake, remember your men. Earth needs them, Jamie—you've told me about that! Let me go back to Vastari and say you'll give your weapons up—at the spaceport! I can make him believe that. Let me ride with you. When we reach Port City—"

"What's to prevent him killing us then?" demanded Jamie, his voice harsh. "He won't let us out of range, for all your lies."

"Oh, Jamie, believe me! Would I risk your life now, when I've saved it? I can control Vastari—I can! But I can't tell you how. Jamie, I'll ride with you . . . would I do that if there was any danger? Jamie . . . I . . . I—"

Her face and her voice both quivered suddenly. He saw her lift her hands to her eyes and a look of terror and confusion went over her features. The whole valley began to swim again in a rainbow shimmer. and sound and sight distorted faintly even with the helmet's protection. Vastari had turned the Knute on—on Quanna and the Earthmen.

Bewilderment made Jamie's mind blank for a moment. Why would even Vastari risk so safe a bargain as he thought his sister was making, sacrifice her wantonly with the Earthmen for no reason at all? For no reason—

Then he saw his own men moving to the left against the swaying backdrop of the waterfalls that flanked Vastari's ravine, heard the shouts of their officers, and knew that someone had blundered inexcusably. Morgan? Morgan who distrusted Quanna and the commander's weakness, and had taken fatal advantage of the delay to attempt storming the Knute up the ravine?

Jamie had no way of knowing, and in spite of himself he was suddenly and savagely glad that Morgan had done it—if he had. The weight was off Jamie now—he had no impossible decision to make—whether to trust Quanna, whether to risk his men, whether to surrender to her pleading as he wanted to do and dared not.

He spurred his restive horse and swung violently around to the ravine, shouting to her over his shoulder: "I'll make my own bargain with Vastari!"

Quanna reeled back in a shower of sand from the padded hoofs, screaming above the shouts of the charging soldiers: "Jamie . . . Jamie, wait! He can't hurt you, Jamie! The Gilson—I have it! Jamie, Jamie, you'll be killed!"

But if he heard any of that illogical cry he did not believe or heed it. The soft thudding of hoof-beats in sand, and Jamie's shouts mingling with the voices of his men, were all that came back to her. She stood staring as the last Terrestrial Patrol on Venus made its last sortie into the mountains in pursuit of outlaw natives.

The range of the Knute followed them. Her own terror and confusion faded as the vibrations died around her, but they did not fade entirely. She watched until the last man vanished up the ravine between the waterfalls. Then, for lack of anything else to do, she began to brush the sand from her cloak with long, unconscious motions.

If Venusians were given to tears, Quanna would have wept then. It had all gone so well up to this vital point. The plan itself had been simple enough—to give Vastari the emasculated Knute and let him ambush the Terrestrials, thinking he could kill them with the vibrations when he chose. Vastari had not wanted to bargain with the Earthmen, but she had convinced him of that necessity, too, in the end. And she had been sure Jamie would surrender. She had seen it in his face, deep down, under the anger and distrust—because he must take his men back to Earth. He could not throw their lives away here for an ideal, and he had known he must surrender in the end, even if it meant lies and a broken bargain at the spaceport.

Neither he nor Vastari, of course, had guessed that the Knute was harmless to kill. She had not trusted Vastari that far, and she had been right indeed. Anger shook her briefly out of her lethargy. Vastari had been ready to sacrifice her, then—if he must—her usefulness was ended now. He had no way of knowing that under her robe she was clutching the Gilson fuse which made his weapon only a dangerous toy.

She smiled a thin, malicious smile even in the midst of her anxiety over Jamie. Vastari must be an astonished man just now. His deadly weapon powerless, enemies charging up the ravine, his men scattering before the gunfire of the Terrestrials—Vastari would be retreating already. With the Knute or without it. The Venusians would not stand long against Earthmen suddenly and uncannily impervious to the supposedly deadly vibrations of the Knute.

But it might be long enough to ruin all that Quanna had planned for. It might be long enough for an arrow or a spear to find a chink of Jamie's cuirass. Vastari's men were such excellent spearmen—

And she could do nothing now but wait.

Faintly, far up among the twisting ravines, the noises of battle reached a climax and wore themselves out. Quanna sat down on a flat stone close beside one of the waterfalls, hearing the thin threnody of its music above the diminishing sounds from overhead.

She did not hear the nearer padding of a horse's hoofs coming up the valley until it was nearly upon her, and a harsh, hissing voice said:

"Quanna!" There was a subtle excitement in the voice that was not wholly explicable.

She looked up, startled almost—but not quite—out of her self-possession. Then she cried: "Ghej! What . . . why—"

He smiled. "So Vastari did attack here," he nodded, glancing about the trampled valley floor where the Terrestrials had thrown off their packs for fighting in the mountains. "I was almost sure he would. The old cave's so near, for one thing. What happened?"

She told him, keeping her voice level. He sat listening, his hands folded on the saddlebow and his opaque, old eyes piercing under the horny lids. When she had finished he nodded gravely.

"Yes—I knew it would be something like that the day you stole the Knute. There had to be something other than simple theft in what you did. So it was all a bluff, eh? Well—" He slanted an upward glance toward the labyrinth of ravines above them, and then swung off his horse a little stiffly. "I'll wait with you until—something happens."

"But why did you come?" Quanna returned belatedly to her first questions.

Ghej shook his crested head.

"Something's happened—I can't tell you yet."

She looked at him curiously from under her lashes, and saw now on the leathery, old face the same repressed excitement she had heard in his voice. Excitement, and something like dread. But she knew there was no use in questioning him.

She did not move again until she heard voices and sliding footsteps up in the ravine. Then she got up and stood quite still in her green cloak against the thin, green veil of the waterfall, waiting.

By twos and threes, carrying their wounded, the Terrestrials came straggling back to the valley. Jamie was not among them.

He was almost the last to return. He came very wearily, alone, one arm hanging in the improvised sling of his unbuttoned tunic and the blood still dripping from what was probably an arrow wound.

Quanna took one involuntary step toward him and then stopped. Jamie looked at her phlegmatically, saying nothing. She saw in his face that he had ceased to believe or trust anything she might do, and he was clinging to the protection his lethargy offered him.

Then he saw Ghej, and his face came alive again.

"Ghej? What's happened? Did you change your mind? I—"

"Tell me first how the battle went," Ghej suggested. "And let Quanna dress your arm. Were the arrows poisoned, Quanna?"

"Some were," said Quanna. "May I help you, Jamie? Please."

He shrugged and sat down on the flat stone. "All right. Dressings in any of the packs. There's one lying over there."

She went humbly to get it. When she returned Jamie was talking in a tired monotone to the Martian. He submitted to her swabbing and bandaging without notice except for a caught breath now and then.

"They got away, of course," he was saying. "With the Knute. Had it barricaded up the ravine, but not well enough. Depending on the vibrations, I suppose, but the damned fools didn't know about the inert fuse and couldn't step it up beyond the first strength."

"I know." Ghej nodded. "Quanna has just told me—she had the Gilson fuse herself, commander."

Quanna looked up over the bandage she was fastening and met Jamie's startled eyes, an uncertain little smile on her lips.

"I tried to tell you," she reminded him gently. "You see, I really didn't mean to have you killed."

His black scowl at her was mostly bewilderment now. "But you said . . . I thought . . . I'm sorry, Quanna. But I still don't understand why—"

"Don't try now." She laid a cool hand on his cheek. "No fever yet? Then I think there was no poison. You'll be able to ride on to Port City, Jamie dear. What about me?"

He frowned a little and took the hand in his. "Not yet, Quanna. Before I go I've got one score to settle. I'm going to find Vastari and get back that Knute if it's the last thing I ever do."

Surprisingly, part of the unconscious tension that showed on Ghej's face suddenly relaxed. "Of course!" he exclaimed. "Find Vastari! Commander, I think I can lead you to him."

Quanna and Jamie stared at the old Martian incredulously. He had been in the confidence of both enemy camps for so long, and each side had come to trust so thoroughly in his impartial neutrality—After a moment Jamie said:

"Did I understand you, Ghej?"

"I want to lead you to Vastari," reiterated the Martian impatiently. "I think I know where he's gone. Venusians always scatter after a rout and meet again later at the leader's hiding place. Vastari will have gone to an old cave near here where he used to play as a boy. He's used it before for a rallying point. But he should be alone there now for an hour or more. I know the place well—it's quite near here. I'll—"

"But, Ghej," interrupted Jamie, "I'm going to kill him. Don't you understand? I know Vastari's your friend."

"I'll lead you to him," Ghej persisted stubbornly.

"Forgive me," hesitated Jamie, "but I've had too much treachery lately—or thought I had." He flashed a glance at Quanna. "You've never interfered with either side in this business, Ghej. I don't—"

"There'll be no treachery," Ghej promised him. "I swear that, commander. I'll lead you, alone, to Vastari. I promise he'll be alone, too. I promise that no Venusians will interfere on his behalf. I promise all that by the symbol of old Mars"—and he sketched the ancient crook-sign in the air.

Jamie pinched his lip and stared at the old man under black brows. There was something elaborately wrong here. He had been aware of the subtle excitement in Ghej's manner ever since they had met, and he knew the Martian was concealing something important. If Ghej was suddenly forsaking Vastari, there was every reason to expect that he might betray Jamie, too—

And yet to meet Vastari face to face before he left Venus was worth a risk. And he had never known a Martian to lie by the sacred crook-symbol of the old world. Sudden recklessness made him shrug and say:

"I'll risk it, Ghej. Only I'll warn my men first. They'll be after me if I'm not back soon. You must tell me where the cave is, Ghej, so they can follow if I don't come back."

Ghej nodded. "I can trust you in that."

Quanna's eyes had been following the conversation from face to face. All this talk of promises and trust seemed foolhardy, particularly with the stakes involved. She was utterly bewildered by Ghej's sudden about-face after a life of neutrality, but she could see clearly enough that there was some strong motive behind it.

All this was unimportant. The heartbreaking thing was that she had failed. She had played her last trick upon Jamie and lost the game. There was no longer any lever she could use to force her way upon the ship that would take him back to Earth, unless—unless—

And then a sudden, blazing idea burst upon her, and she saw how simply and easily she might have avoided all the strategies of the past and gained her one desire by a means so simple it had never occurred to her. For once Vastari knew she had deliberately betrayed him to Jamie, her life would not be safe upon Venus and Jamie would be bound in duty to take her away with him. The simplicity of it was beautiful. Only—there must be witnesses to her treachery, so that the story would spread among Vastari's men. Or else Vastari himself must not die—

"Let me go with you," she asked the two men softly, her mind already spinning with devious plans. They gave her a look of doubtful scrutiny. "I won't interfere," she promised. "I've no love for Vastari, after what he tried to do to me in the valley. Please let me go." Her voice took on the note of irresistible pleading sweetness that Jamie remembered well, and he grinned suddenly. But before he could speak:

"Very well," said Ghej, after a moment of hesitation. "It might be well to have you there." She knew by that he was fitting her into whatever scheme was in his own mind. She lowered her lids demurely and thanked them both.

Vastari's hiding place was a narrow cavern high up in the scarred valley wall, its mouth veiled by green vines thickly abloom with purple trumpet flowers. Ghej left his two companions behind an outcropping and went in alone. The two waited in silence for his return, each too deeply immersed in speculation to speak yet about what still had to be said between them.

Jamie was too much exulted by the prospect of meeting Vastari at last to think as much as he should of Ghej's inexplicable conduct, or of his own weariness or the pain of his wounded arm. He had never performed an execution before, but he felt no scruple now about shooting down an unsuspecting man in cold blood. It would not be a man he killed in the cavern—it would be Venusian anarchy itself. It would mean a little longer peace for the people of Darva and Port City and the other Terrestrial settlements of these mountains. Since he could not leave the cities those weapons which Earth must have, he could at least remove the organized menace which made the weapons necessary.

He was having a daydream. He was thinking that perhaps with Vastari dead, no new leader would rise soon— Perhaps the Terrestrialized cities inside their fortifications would be proof against scattered raids; perhaps in the face of necessity those skilled workmen who had labored under Terrestrial orders might labor of their own volition to reproduce the weapons Earth used to furnish them. Perhaps—

"Commander!" It was Ghej's whisper from beyond their shelter. "He's alone. He has the Knute with him. Follow me, commander."

Belated caution made Jamie hesitate for one last moment. There was still that look of intense, suppressed excitement about the old Martian, and the undernote of sadness in his voice that Jamie had never heard before. He had a sudden memory of that dream of his, and the curious notion which had followed it that Ghej was gray-cloaked Death reaching out its hand for him.

"Hurry!" Ghej was at the cave mouth, beckoning. Jamie shrugged off all his wisdom and shouldered after him through the fragrant, purple-flowered curtain into the cool dimness beyond. Ghej was just ahead of him, Quanna just behind.

The cavern was heavy with the fragrance of trumpet flowers and tremulous with green light filtering through the leaves. A man in a scarlet cloak sat dejectedly upon a ledge opposite them, cradling the folded umbrella of the Knute across his knees.

Vastari looked up, startled, as the three figures blocked light from the cave mouth. He could not quite make out who the other two were against the brightness, and he blinked for a moment, trusting Ghej from long experience and not greatly alarmed.

Jamie slid sidewise to put himself out of silhouette against the light, and his gun hand rose so that green light glittered on the barrel.

"In the name of the Imperial Planet," he said clearly, his voice hollow and echoing between the walls, "I condemn you to death, Vastari."

Ghej, flattened to the wall halfway between them, laughed suddenly and said: "No!" in the hissing Martian syllable of negation. His hand came out from under his cloak with sorcerous speed, and the gun in it was not for Vastari, but for Jamie.

The commander stared down incredulously.

"Drop your gun, commander!" said Ghej, jerking his own weapon ominously.

Jamie let his fingers loosen. He was too bewildered for a moment even to speak as his gun thudded to the sand. He had been half expecting something like this, but it didn't make sense. Vastari's quick Venusian brain, trained in trickery, leaped to swifter understanding.

"Oh, no you don't!" he cried, and was in midair before the words were finished. His red cloak and fair hair streamed as he sprang straight at Ghej. A bright grin of triumph lighted his face as his ringed hand clawed at the Martian's gun.

Ghej stepped sidewise half a pace and his other hand flashed out from beneath his cloak, moving almost too quickly for the eye to see that a small Venusian blackjack swung in his fist. It struck Vastari an accurately glancing blow.

The scarlet figure plunged past Ghej and sprawled upon the sandy floor. Across it Ghej's gun rose to fix Jamie with a black-muzzled stare.

With one lifted hand Jamie sketched the old crook-symbol of Mars in the air. He said bitterly: "Remember? But I might have known—"

"I meant it," Ghej declared, his voice strained and shaking a little. "Wait."

Vastari was sitting up, spitting out sand and vivid Venusian curses.

"Get up," ordered Ghej. "Quanna, help him. Go back to the ledge, you two. Commander, Vastari—I have something to say to you both."

Vastari spat a series of highly colored oaths at him.

"I've gone to great trouble to save your life, my boy," Ghej reminded him mildly. "I shall expect something more from you than curses."

Jamie's brows rose. He was beginning to understand at least a little. Vastari's attack upon his rescuer was clear now—no Venusian willingly allows himself to be so obligated if he can avoid it, particularly by a trick as flagrant as Ghej's had been.

"You owe me a promise now, Vastari," Ghej went on. "Part of it is this—listen in peace to what I have to tell you. Commander, this concerns you, too. I followed you from Darva the day after you left. I rode very fast. Certain news had arrived which you must know before you leave Venus. Vastari, you must hear, too." He hesitated a moment. Then he drew a deep breath and said quietly: "The barbarians have come."

There was a long moment of silence in the cave. This time it was Jamie whose mind moved quicker. Vastari said: "Barbarians? But what—" Jamie's monosyllable interrupted. "Where?"

"At Yvaca. You know it, the walled valley? They landed secretly a week ago and took the city. Word had just come over the mountains when I left."

"Who are they?"

"The worst of the lot, commander. Mixed breeds from half a dozen worlds. The vanguard of no one knows how many other shiploads."

"The first plague spot," said Jamie. There was silence a moment more. Then Vastari's voice, slurred a little as if he were still bewildered from the blow:

"But what is it, Ghej? I—"

"I've tricked you both," Ghej told them, still holding his gun to meet any sudden impulse on the part of either man. "You've been enemies for a long while, but you have a common enemy now and you must listen to me.

"Vastari, the barbarians have come. Venus is being attacked by outworld raiders for the first time in three hundred years."

"We'll drive them out," said Vastari simply.

"These same barbarians are attacking Earth," Ghej reminded him. "If the Imperial Planet can't keep them off what can Venus do?"

"Fight," said Vastari, his eyes on Ghej's gun.

"Not alone. These aren't Terrestrials bent on conquest, my boy. They're bloodthirsty degenerates of a hundred races with nothing but destruction and loot in their minds. And they have weapons that even Earth can't improve on, because it was Earth who gave them away, long ago. No, there's no hope for Venus at all now, unless—" He looked appealingly at Jamie. "Commander—"

Jamie shrugged. "They need me at home, Ghej."

"They need you here. I saw all this happen to Mars, commander. I know the signs. We've never spoken of this before, although the thought has been between us whenever we met. This is the twilight for you and me and Imperial Earth. Do you honestly think civilization can survive what's happening on Earth now? There's no germ of it in the decadent barbarians who are conquering there. Their future is far in the past. Earth gave them a brief new grip on the tools of conquest, and they're using them to destroy Earth, but when it's done they'll go on decaying. They don't understand anything but destruction.

"My world died of an ill like this, commander. Your world is dying of it. But perhaps we can save Venus. If we can't, then this is the twilight of civilized man and he will not rise again."

"Venus?" echoed Jamie scornfully. "It's twilight for Venus, too. What does Venus know about civilization?"

Vastari stared uncomprehendingly from one to the other, waiting his chance to spring at Ghej's gun. Ghej said heatedly:

"Do you remember what I said when we parted at Darva, commander? This is the one peril that might be strong enough to draw all Venusians together against a common enemy—teach them the value of unity and civilization. It's as if the gods were giving us one last chance. But the barbarians won't wait, commander. Venus isn't ready. If you could only stay, just for a little while—just long enough to teach them how to fight—"

"Teach *us* how to fight!" roared Vastari, springing to his feet. "Why, you dried shell of an outworlder, we were born fighting! This is some trick of the Earthmen to lure my men into the open. Why should we join with them just as we're winning our freedom? We'll—"

"Freedom!" Jamie derided him. "Freedom to loot and kill! What do you know about freedom?"

"It's the right to live as we choose!" declared Vastari fiercely. "The same right your people fought for. Not to have tyrants making our laws, policing our towns, collecting our taxes! We don't want you back, Earthman! We'll take our chances against invaders—if that isn't another trick of Ghej's."

"Trick?" Ghej echoed sadly. "My boy, will you have to lose your freedom before you really know the meaning of the word? You must earn freedom before you can control it. You'd destroy yourself if you had what you call freedom now. Wait until the barbarians come with their weapons. The barbarians are destruction itself—wait until *that* overtakes you, my boy, and then remember what you had under the Earthmen!"

"Lies!" shouted Vastari. "Why should we trust you or anyone in league with the tyrant Terrestrials? We can fight for ourselves!"

All this, to Quanna, was wasted breath. The Venusian mind wanders when talk turns to the abstracts, and Quanna had an urgent problem of her own to solve. Under her velvet robe she was clutching the Gilson fuse that would turn the Knute on the ledge beside her into a deadly weapon. She thought she had found the way now to coerce Jamie—that was all her mind had room for.

She was going to turn the killing force of the vibrator upon Vastari. It would take a moment or two before the violence of the vibrations shook his brain cells apart; in that time he would realize that she was a traitor and her life thereafter would be forfeit upon Venus, for Jamie's sake. He would have to take her back with him.

True, Vastari might die. She did not much care if he did. After all, he had been equally ruthless when she stood in his way in the valley among the Earthmen. If he died, then she would shout what she had done to the echoing peaks around the cave, where she knew Vastari's men were hiding. Some of them would hear. It would amount to a burning of bridges that would leave Jamie no choice but to take her.

Imperceptibly she had been edging the folded Knute onto her knee as Vastari shouted his defiance and hatred of Earthmen and the Solar Empire. Ghej and Jamie were absorbed, too. In the green gloom of the cavern her green robe made her a shadow on the wall. If Ghej saw her slip past, he did not heed her. He was too deep in his hopeless argument with Vastari. And Jamie's back was turned.

The Knute was heavy. She slid along the wall and passed the curtain of flowering vines, breathing a little swiftly now. She was putting all hope in this last, desperate cast.

The Knute was not too difficult to set up. She had watched the Darva men do it many times. Here, beyond the cave mouth, across a stretch of sand, was a parapet behind which she could shelter long enough to do what she must without interruption. She had the glass Gilson fuse ready to slip into place. And now—now—

A long shudder swept the purple flower trumpets before the cave. Then the rainbow shimmer of the Knute settled down and all that stretch of wall and vine and cave became unreal, a figment of dream dancing unsteadily before the eyes. She knew that confused terror was invading the minds of the three men inside. She called clearly, yet softly:

"Ghej, send out Vastari. I am going to kill him."

There was stunned silence for a moment from inside the cave. Then Ghej's voice, quavering with the mind-shaking effect of the vibration:

"Quanna . . . Quanna, have you gone mad?"

"I mean it!" she called fiercely. "Send him out or I'll kill you all. I've got the Gilson fuse, you know!" And she smiled secretly. Jamie would not die, even if the full force of the Knute were turned into the cave. For Jamie still wore his helmet, and it would resist the killing vibrations for the few moments it took the others to die. She would be sorry to kill Ghej, but—

There was silence in the unreal cavern, shimmering behind its shimmering vines. Too long a silence. They were planning something.

"Send him out!" she called. "Send him now! I'm putting in the Gilson fuse, Ghej! Commander! Do you want to die with him?"

Still silence.

Quanna found the socket for the little glass pencil of the fuse. She fumbled a bit, putting it in. It stuck the first time. Then there was a small click and she felt a subtle change in the vibration of the Knute. Deeper, heavier. The purple trumpets of the vine began to wilt, folding softly upon their stems. The leaves crumpled. Death was pouring into the cave.

"The fuse is in," called Quanna. "Are you ready to die, Vastari?"

There was a heavy step upon the cave floor. The curtain of withering vines swept aside and a man stood in the doorway looking up at her. Jamie. His black head bare of the shielding helmet. He stood in silence, feet planted wide, frowning at her somberly under heavy brows. He was like a figure in a dream, shimmering in the full bath of the killing rays.

"Jamie, Jamie!" Quanna sobbed, and hurled the Knute backward off the parapet. Its rays swept up across the cliff in a shimmering rainbow and the machine clattered down the slope in an avalanche of pebbles, its death ray fanning the clouds.

Quanna could not remember afterward stumbling down the rocks toward the cave. Her first conscious awareness was of Jamie fending her unsteadily off his wounded arm as he leaned against the cave wall with closed eyes, waiting for his brain to stop shaking with the force of the Knute.

In the cave, Ghej and Vastari sat with heads in hands, blind and sick, as the vibrations faded slowly inside their skulls. Quanna was abstractly glad that they still lived. Now her treachery was established without the need for outside evidence. But it had been a near thing—too near, for Jamie. She shivered a little, guiding him to a seat on the ledge.

After a while Vastari lifted his head unsteadily and gave Quanna a poisonous glare. She met it opaquely. His eyes shifted to Jamie and he said in a bitter voice:

"Damn you, Earthman—I owe you my life! Now what did you want badly enough to take that risk for me?"

"Nothing," Jamie said wearily, not lifting his head. "Don't bother me."

There was something so electric in the breathless silence that followed that in a moment Jamie looked up to see what was causing it. He met Vastari's look of blank amazement.

"Nothing?" echoed Vastari in an incredulous voice. "Then why—"

"Oh, sure—I came here to kill you." Jamie spoke in a tired and indifferent voice. "But things are different now. Venus is going to need her leaders."

"But—you risked your life! No one ever does that without a reason!"

Jamie looked at him in silence. He was not sure himself just why he had done it. And there was no hope of making this Venusian understand how he felt about the world to which he had given twenty years and all his hopes and interests, the world upon which mankind might have found its ultimate future—

"You could command me to join forces with you, if you wanted that." Vastari was still groping.

"You'd be no good to me at the point of a gun," Jamie shrugged. "Fighting the barbarians will be a full-time job. I wouldn't want an ally I won like that."

Vastari sat very still, considering Jamie with fathomless eyes. Perhaps Ghej's warnings had frightened him more than his pride had let him admit. Perhaps he had been waiting for a chance to surrender gracefully. Perhaps this first encounter with genuine selflessness honestly impressed him. There was no guessing what went on behind that expressionless face. But at last Vastari said slowly:

"My life belongs to you until I redeem it, Earthman. I am pledged to Ghej, too. Will it satisfy you both if I offer my men and myself as your sworn allies until the invaders are driven away?"

Ghej's hooded head came up for the first time since the vibrations had filled the cave. He stared long and unblinkingly at the young Venusian. Jamie was staring, too. Presently Jamie's eyes shifted to Ghej, and the two exchanged a long, questioning look in which hope was slowly dawning. After a moment Ghej said in a shaken voice:

"Venus is the morning star from Earth this time of year."

Jamie smiled. It was his own figure of speech, coming spontaneously into the Martian's mind. But he only said practically:

"It would mean much hard work, Vastari. Much sacrifice."

Vastari said with dignity: "Tell me what you need."

"More than you can give, perhaps. You can't fight the barbarians with spears. Even if you drove this group out by a miracle, there'll be more. You'll need modern weapons. There are men in the Terrestrialized cities who know how to make them, but they need supplies. That'll mean law and order, Vastari. You can't get raw materials or transport them in an anarchy where every brawling tribe has the 'freedom' to do as it likes. You'll have to forget all quarrels, forget personal jealousies, forget greed and loot and fighting. It'll mean backbreaking labor, night and day. You've got to work the mines and the machines again, hard and fast. We'll help all we can. We'll see that your trained workmen are taught what little else they may need to know, before we leave. But we must leave soon, Vastari."

Vastari was watching the Earthman's face with narrowed eyes, searching for some sign of the trickery he could not yet believe wholly absent. His quicksilver mind was turning the points over as Jamie brought them up, but nowhere, apparently, could he find anything that might be two-edged. Finally he nodded, still with that puzzled look. "Very well, it shall be done."

Yes, thought Jamie, with Ghej's help it might yet be done, after all. The Venusians were so childlike in so many ways, irresponsible, unable to see beyond the needs of the next moment. But Vastari, with his dream of freedom, distorted though it was, proved them more capable of pursuing an ideal than Jamie would ever have believed. And if the barbarians frightened them enough, perhaps they might work together to destroy them. And the work together, the common danger —would it be enough to build a civilization on? Jamie knew he would never hear the answer to that question.

The walled valley of Yvaca was doubly walled with flame. From the last Terrestrial spaceship left on Venus, slanting down toward it on broad, steel wings, it looked like the valley of hell. Only the high-walled Terrestrial city of Yvaca remained now; all around it the native village that filled the valley had been fired by the invaders to keep the Venusians at bay. But there was one ship left on Venus, and Yvaca was still vulnerable from the air.

In the deep night twilight flame lapped high about the city walls and lighted the low clouds over Yvaca with a sullen, sulphurous glow. Looking down from that height as the ship slid down a long aërial incline above the peaks, Jamie could not see the Venusian mountaineers ringing Yvaca. But he knew they were there. He spoke into a microphone and felt the floor slant more sharply as Yvaca seemed to rise at a tilted angle in the port before him.

In the heart of the city, ringed by blackened ruins, lay the invader's spaceship. They had brought it down in one careless sliding crash that demolished three city blocks. A pale stab of light shot upward from the city as the barbarians sighted the swooping ship; Jamie could see small, distorted figures running for their ruin-cradled vessel, and his teeth showed in a hard grin as lightning flamed downward from the ship. There was something horrible about the barbarians even from this height; their warped, degenerate shapes were vicious parodies of men.

Blue fire fanned downward again from the Earth ship and touched the other vessel with a gout of flame. Half of it flew into glittering flinders that made the air sparkle over Yvaca. And now, thought Jamie, there was one ship left on Venus. The first of them had come from Earth for conquest. This last, he told himself, would set Venusians free of more than Earthly domination before it left.

The pale, stabbing ray of the barbarians' weapon shot skyward again, and the Terrestrial ship slid deftly sidewise as the ray shaved it, raking the city below with fingers of blue light that were tipped with flame wherever they touched Yvaca.

From this height there was silence in the vessel. Jamie knew that below him, in the red inferno of the valley, cliff echoed to bellowing cliff with the roar of gunfire and the crash of sliding walls and the deep-throated soughing of flame. But he would never hear the sounds of Venus any more. Already the city below was afire. Those who escaped would find Venusians waiting in a grim circle around the valley. The first plague spot of the malady that was killing Earth was being wiped out here in flame.

There would be other spots, perhaps very soon. It might be well for Venus if they came soon, to keep the knowledge of peril fresh in careless minds. For Venus would have to meet the next attacks unaided. Remembering the feverish activity now in progress among the mountain cities, Jamie thought Venus might meet them well. He could not be sure about that, of course. He would have to leave Venus, never knowing.

He spoke again into the microphone and the ship banked for the last time over flaming Yvaca under the glowing clouds. No more rays leaped skyward from the city. The barbarians were in full flight. His work was done.

Cool hands upon his cheeks roused Jamie from his contemplation of the inferno below as the ship swung away. He looked up and smiled wearily into Quanna's face.

"Your last look at Venus, my dear," he told her, nodding down. She gave him a puzzled, little frown under delicate brows.

"It's not too late yet, Jamie. Oh, why wouldn't you stay? It would have been so easy to let the rest go on. You and I on Venus might have ruled the world!"

He shook his head helplessly. "I'm not a free man, Quanna. Less now than ever. I've a duty to Venus as well as to Earth—I've got to help hold the barbarians off until Venus is ready for them. Earth needs every man and every gun, but not to save herself. Earth doesn't know it, and I don't suppose she ever will, but her duty now is to keep the barbarians busy for Venus' sake—" He looked up at the girl's uncomprehending face and smiled. "Never mind. Go get your harp, Quanna, and sing to me, will you? We'll sit here and watch the last of Venus—Look, we're coming into daylight already."

Far behind them the sullen glow of burning Yvaca faded as they neared the edge of the cloud-tide. Diluted sunlight was pouring down upon the tremendous turguoise mountains and the leaning cliffs astream with waterfalls, all the high, blue country they would never see again. Quanna strummed her Martian harp softly.

"I'll probably be court-martialed," Jamie mused, his eyes on the mountains falling away below. "Or—maybe not. Maybe they'll need fighting men too badly for that. I'm doing you no service, Quanna, or myself, either. For your sake I wish you could have stayed."

"Hush," said Quanna, and struck the harp string. "I'll sing you 'Otterburn' again. Forget about all that, my dear. Listen." And her thin, sweet voice took up the ballad.

"The Otterburn's a bonny burn,
It's pleasant there to be,
But there is naught on Otterburn
To feed my men and me—"

Jamie laughed suddenly, but he shook his head when she lifted questioning eyes. He had remembered his dream again, and unexpectedly it made fantastic sense that perhaps only a Celt might have read into the dream and the song that had inspired it. He hummed the stanza again:

"Oh, I have dreamed a dreary dream
Beyond the Isle of Skye,
For I saw a dead man win a fight
And I think that man was I."

The clouds below were thickening now between him and the great blue mountains of Venus that slanted away below. The Isle of Skye, the morning star. The hope of civilized man. He was leaving the future behind him, if mankind had any future at all. James Douglas was a dead man indeed, sailing out into the nighttime of space toward a dying world where nothing but death waited for him. But he left the Isle of Skye behind, and on it a battle won against the powers of evil. If ever a dead man won a fight, thought Jamie, I think that man was I.

The ship drove on into darkness.

Like mist before the dawn, the reign of terror at last melted away. The barbarians, exhausted, their plunder spent, were finally absorbed by the old culture which they would have destroyed. Self-sufficient feudal communities sprang up and squabbled with one another. In 7700 freedom existed only within the sanctuaries, where groups of men, possessing nothing, nurtured their ideals. Here the hope of the future awaited its chance.

TABOO

by Fritz Leiber

"IN THE name of the Great Heritage, I claim refuge!"

The voice was strong and trumpet-clear, yet with a curious note of mockery. The face was in shadow, but the embers of a smoky sunset outlined, with smudged brush-strokes of blood, the giant figure. The left hand lightly gripped the lintel of the low doorway for support. The right hung limp—Seafor noted that there the sunset red merged into real blood, which now began to drip upon the floor.

Seafor looked up. "If I am not mistaken," he said, "you are Arnine, the outlaw—"

"When there was law, or rather, the illusion of law, which there hasn't been, in my lifetime," interjected the other, in an amused rumble.

"—who has ravaged a hundred petty domains," Seafor continued imperturbably, "who has thieved, kidnaped, and killed without mercy, whose trickery and cunning have already become a legend, and who does not care one atom in chaos for the Great Heritage which he now invokes to save his life."

"What difference does that make?" Arnine chuckled. "You have to grant me refuge if I claim it. That's your law." He swayed, gripped the lintel more strongly, and looked behind him. "And if you don't cut your speech of welcome pretty short, it'll be my funeral oration. I'm still fair prey, you know, until I'm inside the door."

There was a sudden humming in the murky sky. A narrow beam laced down, firing the air to incandescence, making a great gout of blinding light where it struck the ground a dozen yards away. Immediately came thunder, a puff of heat, and the smell of burning. Seafor fell back a step, blinking. But in the empty hush that followed the thunder, his reply to Arnine sounded as cool and methodical as his previous remarks.

"You are right, on all counts. Please come in." He moved a little to one side and inclined his head slightly. "Welcome, Arnine, to Bleaksmound Retreat. We grant you refuge."

The outlaw lurched forward, yet with something of the effect of a swagger. As he passed Seafor, there came from beyond the door a groan of the sort that sets the teeth on edge. Seafor looked at him sharply.

"You have a companion?"

The outlaw shook his head. He turned, so that the ruddy sunset glow highlighted his lean, big-featured face—a dangerous, red-haired god, a hero with a fox somewhere among his ancestors.

"Some beast, perhaps, singed by the blast," he hazarded, and showed his teeth in a long, thin smile.

Seafor made no comment. "Hyousik! Teneks!" he called. "We have a guest. Attend to his hurts. Relieve him of his weapons." Then he took down from the wall a small transparent globe with a dark cylindrical base and went outside.

It was a ragged and desolate landscape that opened up for Seafor. The crimson band of sky edging the horizon heightened the illusion that a forest fire had recently burned through it. Dead and sickly trees were outlined blackly.

Seafor skirted the blasted patch, holding up the globe, in which a curled wire now glowed brightly. The humming returned. He did not look up, but he moved the luminous globe back and forth to call attention to it.

The groan was repeated. A metallic shimmer caught Seafor's eyes. A few steps brought him to the wreck of a small flier. Beside it, in an unnaturally contorted posture, was sprawled a small figure clad in rich synthetics.

Seafor unlashed the small wrists, and did a little to ease the broken ankle. The boy shuddered and tried to draw away. Then his eyes opened.

"Seafor! Seafor of Bleaksmound!" There was surprise in the shrill voice. He stared and plucked at Seafor's sleeve with his skinny fingers.

The humming increased. It was as if the buzzing of one giant wasp had brought others.

"You're safe now," said Seafor. "Arnine's gone. Your father's men will be here very soon."

The boy's fingers tightened. "Don't let them take me," he whispered suddenly.

"Don't you understand? I said your father's men."

The boy nodded. "Please don't let them take me," he repeated in the same imploring whisper. "I want to stay with you, Seafor. I want to stay at Bleaksmound."

Within seconds of each other, four fliers grounded, their repulsors scattering clods of black soil. From each, two men sprang.

The boy tugged frantically at Seafor's arms, as if by that means he could force a nod or a reassuring smile. Then a kind of boyish cunning brightened his eyes.

"Refuge, Seafor," he whispered. "I claim refuge."

Seafor did not reply and his expression remained impassive, but he hooked to his belt the globe which he had previously set down, and carefully lifted the boy in his arms.

The men hurried up. They wore identical emblems on their blue synthetic coveralls and skull-tight hoods. They carried blasters. They seemed like soldiers, except for a lack of discipline and a kind of animal bleakness that darkened their faces like a tangible film. Because of that film, they did not even seem human—quite.

Seafor's gray robe was crude and beggarly compared with their sleek clothing, but his pale, stern, ascetic face, like something carved from ivory, shone with a light that further darkened theirs.

Now that they faced him, a certain confusion became apparent in their manner.

"We're Ayarten of Rossel's men," one of them explained. "That's his son you've got there. Arnine the outlaw kidnaped him, intending ransom. We brought down his flier."

"I know that," said Seafor.

"We're grateful to you, outsider, for the help you've given Ayarten's son," the other continued. He stepped forward to take the boy, but his manner lacked assurance.

Seafor did not reply. The boy clung to him. He turned and walked toward the dark, square mass of Bleaksmound.

"We must take the boy home to his father," the other protested, following a step. "Give him to us, outsider."

"He has claimed refuge," Seafor told them without turning his head, and walked on.

They conferred together in whispers, but no action came of it. They watched the luminous globe jog gently up the hill, casting a huge fantastic shadow.

"Gives you the shivers," muttered one. "Dead men. That's what they're like. Dead men."

"You can't figure them out. Think of getting light by heating a wire inside a ball of dead air. Like our primitive ancestors. And when there's atom power a-plenty!"

"But they give up atom power, you know, when they give up everything else—when they die to the world."

"Imagine the boy asking for refuge. Scared out of his wits, I suppose. Never catch me doing that."

"I always thought young Ayten was a queer boy."

"Ayarten won't like this when we tell him. He won't like it at all—not with Arnine taking shelter in the same place. He'll be angry."

"Not our fault, though."

"We'd better hurry. Set the cordon. Report to Ayarten."

Burly, blue-tinged shadows, they dispersed to their fliers.

Seafor handed the boy to two of his gray-robed brethren, who had a stretcher ready, and preceded them to the infirmary. He met Arnine coming out of the weapon room under escort, and noted the greedy look on the outlaw's face.

"Remarkable collection you have there," said Arnine. "Some of the fine old models they don't turn out any more. And so many!"

"Some people die in refuge," Seafor explained. "A few become outsiders. And some go away without reclaiming their weapons."

Arnine's ruddy-gold eyebrows arched skeptically. He seemed on the point of launching a satirical reply when he noticed the stretcher.

Seafor motioned the bearers on to the infirmary. "Do you feel up to having dinner in the refectory?" he asked.

The outlaw laughed boisterously, as if the idea of his being too sick to eat was very humorous indeed. His arm was in a sling and the feline springiness had returned to his stride. Seafor accompanied him back along the gloomy corridor.

"Is it your intention to become the accomplice of a kidnaper?"

Arnine asked in amused tones a moment later. He showed no embarrassment at his previous lie having been uncovered.

"The boy claimed refuge," Seafor said.

"They'd have found him soon enough, and that would have satisfied Ayarten. But the way it is now— Well, you're lucky that the border war with Levensee of Wols is keeping Ayarten's hands full. Still, even that may not be enough." He shrugged his good shoulder.

An elderly man turned into the corridor some distance ahead of them. He wore a green uniform of archaic cut, faded and frayed but very neat. Disks of a greenish metal formed the chief insignia.

"The President of the Fourth Global Republic," Seafor replied in answer to Arnine's immediate question. "Been in refuge here for the past year."

The outlaw expressed incredulity. "Why, if that were the case, he'd have to be two hundred . . . two hundred fifty years old."

"Not at all. When the last elected president died, he exercised his power to appoint an emergency successor to serve until elections could be resumed. Several of his cabinet members held the office. When the last of those died, he handed on the executive authority to some faithful subordinate—perhaps a secretary or bodyguard. It's gone on that way ever since."

Arnine roared with laughter. "Do you mean to say that that old chap still thinks of the state of the world as merely an emergency temporarily interrupting the majestic and tranquil course of the Fourth Global Republic? Is *he* grooming a secretary to succeed *him?*"

Seafor shook his head. "He was alone when he came here. He is a very old man. He has decided to sign over his authority to me, when he dies."

Arnine's laughter became Gargantuan. "One more worthless tradition for you to guard! One more trinket tossed into the rubbage bag of the Great Heritage!" He looked at the man ahead more closely. "I see a blaster. Isn't that against your rules?"

"As commander in chief of the Earth's armed forces, we have granted him certain extraordinary privileges," Seafor replied imperturbably.

Arnine shrugged his shoulder, indicating that it was impossible to find a laugh big enough to do justice to that jest. They had caught up with the old man now, and Seafor introduced them.

"Your excellency—Arnine the outlaw."

The old man inclined his head politely. "It is always good to meet a fellow citizen. Though I warn you, sir, that when peace is restored I will have to proceed against you with the utmost severity." There was a grave twinkle in his eyes. "Still, no need to dwell upon such subjects now. Perhaps you can give me news of what's happening outside this little corner of the Republic. Surely an outlaw ought to get around." His voice became thoughtful. "No one seems to travel any more—perhaps because it's so easy."

Arnine seemed to derive amusement from replying in the same quaintly polite veins. Seafor left them talking amiably and returned to the infirmary.

A gray-robed doctor was setting the broken ankle. Unmindful of his sharp command the boy tried to sit up.

"Can I stay here, Seafor?" he called anxiously.

Seafor nodded. "For the present, at least. Now be quiet."

He stood beside the bed until the doctor had finished. Then he looked down at the small damp face and asked, "Why do you want to stay here, Ayten? Why don't you want to go home?" A faint smile touched his thin, pale lips.

The doctor went out.

The boy frowned, trying to find the right answer. A look of fear came into his eyes. "I don't want to go home because . . . because they're not human beings—not father or his women, or any of them. They're—animals."

"All human beings are animals," said Seafor softly.

"When I was little, I thought they were gods," said the boy. "I took it for granted we were all gods. Why shouldn't I? Things that take you up in the sky at the touch of a finger, transformers that synthesize food and clothes and dwelling domes, weapons that annihilate, picture tapes that tell you how to do things—all that and more!

"But gradually I realized that something must be wrong. All those wonderful things didn't square with our cramped lives, with the endless jealousies and quarrels and killings. Nobody ever had a new idea. Nobody ever seemed to think. Nobody could answer my *real* questions—neither could the picture tapes. They couldn't tell me why the world seemed to end at the boundaries of Rossel, why we almost never saw strangers, except to kill them, why, with all those wonderful powers, we lived like beasts in a cave!"

His face was flushing with the excitement and relief of talking out his thoughts. Quietly Seafor laid his hand on the small shoulder.

"For a long time I told myself that it must be a kind of test," the boy continued, "that they were seeing if I was worthy of the domain of Rossel, and that some day, when I had proved myself, a door would open and I would walk into the real world, the big friendly world I knew must exist somewhere.

"Now I know there is no door. The real world doesn't exist—except for you outsiders, in some way that I don't understand. And you've given up all the things that we possess." He caught hold of Seafor's wrist. "Why is that? And why, with all our powers, do we live like animals?"

Seafor waited a moment before he spoke. "There was a real world," he said. "There's still a little of it left, and some day it will all come back. Civilization came because men needed each other. They found that life was easier and better if they traded together—not only the necessities of life but also the things that can't be weighed or measured and that haven't a definite barter value, like the beauty of a song, or the joy of dancing, or the understanding of each other's troubles and hopes.

"As civilization grew, that mutual dependency increased and became infinitely complicated. Each man's life and happiness was the work of millions of his fellow workers.

"But there were forces working in the opposite direction. Man was learning to synthesize materials and make use of universal power sources. Wars accelerated this process, by periodically shutting off supplies of essential raw materials.

"That trend reached its ultimate development with the perfecting of atomic power and the invention of multipurpose transmutators capable of supplying all the necessities of life anywhere.

"At almost any other time that development would have been a great boon, freeing man's energies for more intensive participation in the social quest. But the shadow of the Second Global Empire still darkened the Fourth Global Republic, and interplanetary war with the Venusian and Martian colonies sapped its strength. The Great Migrations began. There was an endless, seemingly purposeless surging of populations among the three planets, attended by wanton massacres.

"The end product was stagnation. Distrust in the very forces that brought civilization into being. Humanity turned in upon itself, mentally and physically. Small communities came into existence, each built around some leader who had a little more energy and determination left than any of his fellows. The stragglers were killed, or they drifted into such communities—and stayed there. Men were tired.

They wanted only to attach themselves to a single locality—to the soil. A vegetative cycle succeeded a cycle of movement.

"In any previous age, hunger and want would have broken that unwholesome equilibrium. But now each little community was independent of trade, so far as the necessities of life were concerned. And as for the things that have no definite barter value—disillusioned men could get along without them.

"The jealousies and rivalries and suspicions of small-community existence came to make up the whole of life. Strangers were persecuted. There was almost continual warfare between neighboring communities, but it remained a petty, spiteful warfare, incapable of giving rise to widespread conquest and the establishment of nations, because it lacked any enduring economic motivation.

"That's the sort of world you've been born into, Ayten."

The boy said nothing. Seafor continued, "A few men realized what was being lost. They saw all of Earth's cultural heritage sliding into oblivion, save the bare minimum needed for the new self-maintaining mode of life. Reading and writing, for example, were going into the discard—picture tapes were sufficient to transmit the necessary education.

"These men found that they could not change the small-community system of life from within. So long as they remained part of it, they would have to conform to its savage and inhospitable laws. So they got out of it. They gave up atomic power. They gave up all valued possessions. Only by paying that price could they purchase even the most shadowy immunity from attack. They formed small communities. They devoted themselves to preserving the cultural heritage and to maintaining the ideals of universal brotherhood and of individual honor and integrity. They became the outsiders."

Ayten whispered, "I want to be an outsider."

Seafor nodded with a frown. "I tell you what," he said finally. "You can live with us as a novice, and work and study for a year. Then, if you're still determined, we'll talk it over again."

Ayten smiled.

In the refectory, Arnine's brown-and-gold tunic made a gaudy break in the long rows of gray, as did the clothing of the other refugees.

Seafor paused by Arnine. "How does it taste after a diet of synthetics?"

The outlaw turned around. "Inferior, of course. But I've been in refuge before. Where do you get such garbage?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Most of it we grow in shallow tanks on the roof."

"Swamp plants, I suppose?"

"No. They originally grew in dirt."

Arnine's long lips curled in mild and somewhat humorous disgust. There came the faint chiming of the bell over Bleaksmound's door. "How's the boy?" he asked suddenly. "Only slightly hurt? As I thought. You'll be sending him back to his father, of course?"

"On the contrary. He has decided to become a novice."

Arnine stared at him through half-shut eyes. "You play a strange game," he said finally. "Turning a kidnaping into a conversion! It turns out that *I* am *your* accomplice! Do you realize the trouble you're brewing? Outsiders exist only on sufferance, you know."

"You mean I should honor your claim of refuge, but not his?" Seafor's eyes were enigmatic.

An outsider approached Seafor from the hall. "Ayarten of Rossel is at the door. He desires to speak to you."

"You see?" said Arnine sardonically. "The way things are going, neither claim of refuge is likely to amount to much. Let me known the terms of his ultimatum."

Seafor went out. Swiftly the refectory emptied as the outsiders went off to their tasks. Two remained, ostensibly to converse with Arnine. The outlaw, prowling restlessly between the empty benches, did not make their task any easier. His ears were cocked all right, but for noises outside the refectory rather than in it. His movements were aimless, seemingly, but when Seafor returned he was standing by the door.

"He gives us until dawn," said Seafor, "to give up the boy."

"And if you refuse?"

"He threatens to make an example of Bleaksmound."

"You see?" said Arnine. "He didn't let his border war with Levensee hold him back."

"I was not counting on that," said Seafor. "Though it strikes me that he is unwise in drawing off so many of his men for the cordon he is setting around Bleaksmound."

"And you will refuse to give up the boy?" Arnine's voice was edged with anger.

"I gave the boy my word that he could stay in refuge," said Seafor. "In the days of the great civilizations, mankind could afford some weaknesses in the individual moral fiber, because the general progressive trends were strong enough to nullify individual treacheries. But now trust in a man's word has become part of the almost forgotten heritage. If we cannot keep that alive, then all the outsiders' work is vain."

Arnine laughed, but unpleasantly.

"Very well," he said. "In that case I shall leave Bleaksmound, for obvious motives of self-preservation."

"Ayarten has set too strong a cordon," said Seafor. "You wouldn't be able to."

"That is for me to judge. Please give orders that my weapons be restored. I leave at once."

Seafor shook his head. "You are our guest. We cannot let you go so soon."

"You mean to hand me over to Ayarten?"

"No. You claimed refuge. You shall have it."

Seafor's sleep turned into a restless, rocking darkness, alive with menace. There was a hand at his shoulder. Someone was shaking him awake. He sat up.

"Ayarten has come?"

"No, but Arnine has escaped. Knocked us down. Darted down a side corridor. Can't be found."

He recognized the voice of Hyousik, one of the two outsiders he had set to guard the outlaw. He threw on his gray robe and hurried out.

Bleaksmound was alive with movement, like a nest of gray ants in which a spider is loose. Seafor made for the infirmary. It was as he expected. Young Ayten was gone.

From ahead came the hiss of a blaster. Seafor hurried to the entry hall.

Arnine stood with his back to the outer door. In his good hand he held a blaster. The other was out of the sling and fresh blood stained the bandages. At his feet lay young Ayten, unconscious. Arnine's face was racked with pain but he smiled tautly.

Seafor strode toward him. When there was only a few feet between them, Arnine leveled the blaster.

"The first was only a warning," he said. "This time it will be for business."

Seafor stopped.

"I mean to bargain for my life with Ayarten," Arnine continued. "Later you will realize that it was for your good, too."

Behind Seafor the circle of silent gray-robed figures parted to make way for an old man in faded green.

"Who dares do violence in Bleaksmound Retreat?" The voice of the President of the Fourth Global Republic quavered, but a note of iron determination came through. "My authority holds here. Outlaw, put down your weapon." He fumbled with trembling hand for the blaster at his hip.

A ray of blinding light touched the old man, pierced him. Arnine laughed.

In that instant, Seafor lunged forward. The ray shifted, nicked the gray robe, sizzled against the stone floor. Then Arnine was down, grunting with pain because Seafor had thrown him so that he fell on his wounded arm. With both hands Seafor gripped the blaster, wrested it from him, sent it spinning across the floor.

Arnine stopped struggling. "You've wrecked your own last chance of safety," he said.

Seafor knelt on his chest. "And you have murdered. We have law here, although it holds good only within these walls. Our penalty for murder is lifelong imprisonment."

The bell began to clang deafeningly.

Through his weakness and pain, Arnine smiled.

"I think that penalty has been commuted to sudden death—likely for all of us. You know who that is. Dawn has come."

The door opened. It was Ayarten of Rossel, burly, mean-visaged, clad in cloth of gold. But he staggered, his face was chalk-white, the cloth of gold was torn.

He did not see his son lying at his feet.

"Refuge!" he cried. "Levensee of Wols has struck. He has seized my domain. Those of my men that remained have gone over to him. I claim refuge!"

Emancipated in 8200 by the Tragon of Milay who established his council of kings by military and diplomatic feats, the people of Earth once more had one world. Commerce revived rapidly and the organization of the corporation reappeared. By the year 9000 all corporations had grouped themselves into separate communal entities, with Power Center the greatest. One element, individual freedom, was lacking to make the cycle complete.

OVERTHROW

by Cleve Cartmill

Chief of Police Josh Cameron focused the blur on his screen.

"Outlaws!" he muttered. "How in the bloody—"

He touched a button labeled "pilot." It glowed instantly and he said, "Go up!"

"We're at thirty thousand now," the pilot's voice complained. "This is no stratoliner."

"Ask the captain to come here, please."

"Yes, sir."

Cameron watched the slim image grow in size until Captain Jorgeson squeezed through the narrow entrance of the guard cubicle. Cameron saluted.

"Will you be so good, sir? We're in a jam, I'm afraid. Look!"

Captain Jorgeson fixed the screen with a bright-blue glance. His great hands knotted. His face flamed red as his hair.

"I'll be a son of an actor!" he grated. "It leaked out again!" He glared at Cameron. "Well? You came along especially to prevent this. Nobody knew about it but you, me, and the pilot. What have you to say for yourself?"

A slow flush seeped up Cameron's dark throat and overspread his tan. His black eyes went coldly blank.

"On this plane," he said with slow emphasis, "you are the law.

May I remind you that our positions will be reversed when we return to Plastic Prime?"

"*If* we return, sir!" the captain flared. "Don't pull official dignity on me, Cameron. I'm trying to get the truth. Did you open your mouth to *anyone* about this mission?"

"Of course not! Am I a fool?"

"We'll see. Well, you're the guard. Get us through."

"With not even a point-blank disintegrator? You expect a great deal, captain."

"You'd better deliver," Captain Jorgeson said grimly.

When the big red-haired man had gone, Cameron turned gloomy dark eyes on the screen. The rakish silhouette grew so swiftly that he caught his breath. What speed! The forces of law and order were far behind the outlaws in this respect, and Cameron found himself wondering again why they did not attack one or more of the Centers.

Yet they never tried, and this made him vaguely uneasy whenever he thought of the outlaws. They made their own rules, or lived by none. They raided freight planes, they rarely came off second best in brushes with the military, and they had sources of information which were frightening.

This shipment, for example, had been Plastic Center's most highly guarded secret. No more than a half dozen officials had known about it. It was inconceivable that any of them had ratted. Somebody had, unless this encounter were pure accident; and the purpose clearly apparent in the outlaw's direct approach threw cold water on that flicker of hope.

It was dashed with cold finality when a precise voice came through Cameron's monitor:

"Down, or I'll cut you in two. At once, please."

No questions. Just a command. The speaker didn't want to know where *Fleetfin* was headed, who was aboard, or what time it was.

"Who are you?" Captain Jorgeson blustered.

Cameron watched the grille of his monitor as if he could conjure the voices into faces and legs.

"I don't *want* to kill you," the frosty voice replied, "but I'm not in the least sentimental. I shall give you thirty minutes to land at Dead Horse Spring, two points to port. You'll have to—"

Fleetfin shuddered slightly, and Cameron cursed the captain's stubborn idiocy. He touched another button on his panel.

"Down, damn you!" he ordered. "We'll settle the question of authority later. I order you down. You can't fight that ship. Cease firing!"

The outlaw's voice broke in, crisp with annoyance. "You can see that I'm shielded. One more blast from you and you begin second-guessing in hell."

Captain Jorgeson, a red-topped mountain of wrath in the cubicle doorway, roared at Cameron.

"Who's giving orders here? The council will—"

"Oh, dry up!" Cameron said. "I told you we'll fight it out later. I don't want to be on a killed-in-action list. There's nothing you can do, anyway, but go down. He's shielded. Why make him sore by shooting at him?"

"You're under arrest!" Jorgeson snarled.

Cameron bowed sardonically at the departing footsteps and sat back to await the landing.

Clouds which might have come straight out of Textile Center seemed to drift upward, and presently Dead Horse Spring was visible in miniature far below. It rose steadily toward them, as did the pocked desert. They were soon on its face and the long black ship drifted gently toward them.

"All outside," came the outlaw's voice.

Cameron joined the captain and the young, bright-eyed pilot as they stepped out into the pungent heat. The odor of sage was hot in their nostrils and they shielded their eyes from sand glare as the outlaw craft settled fifty yards away.

Cameron noted a phenomenon, then. Some twenty feet before him, the surface of the desert was marked by a line no more than an inch in width. It was no mark such as paint would make, it was not a line of vegetation, it was a line drawn by—nothing. The sand itself writhed within this narrow space, and the boiling demarcation stretched off to either side as far as the eye could see. It was as if a million tiny animals burrowed from underneath in geometric formation.

He flicked a dark glance at his companions, but their gaze was fixed on the figure who emerged from the long plane.

This was a man, like other men, dressed in the garb of an ordinary citizen. His shorts, sandals, and shirt would have passed without notice in any crowd. But not his bearing, not his face.

Whereas the ordinary citizen went stolidly about his directed business, this man walked like an official, or a commander. Whereas the eyes of an ordinary citizen were usually blank and withdrawn, this man's sparked. He was dark and hawklike, and completely at ease as he approached, despite the fact that he was unarmed.

His wide thin mouth curled up at one corner as he examined the trio. "I am happy," he began in courteous phrases of the day, "to see you. May I be of service?"

"Your offer," the captain replied automatically, "is most kind, and reciprocated." Having disposed of the amenities, Captain Jorgeson roared, "What the—"

The outlaw lifted a dark hand. "In good time, captain. Please notice the agitation here in the sand." He pointed to the narrow, writhing line which Cameron had already seen. "That marks the location of my defensive weapon. You see that I am unarmed. I warn you not to attack, for if you touch this screen you will simply—vanish. I am quite serious," he added, as Captain Jorgeson began to grin. "Don't—"

He broke off as Jorgeson whipped a Payne coagulator from its holster and depressed the activator. He waited, calmly, until the captain, with a baffled expression, lowered his weapon.

"Don't touch it," he continued.

"It's a bluff!" Jorgeson said quietly to Cameron and the pilot. "There isn't any such weapon. Let's get him."

The big redhead led the charge in a plunging rush and the young pilot was on his heels. Cameron stood motionless. He decided that if the outlaw really had such a weapon, attack was useless. If not, let the others prove it.

Jorgeson reached the area—and exploded. It was just that, Cameron thought. It sounded like an old-style bomb—a muffled *boom,* a brilliant flash, and silence. The silence was infinitesimal, for the young pilot could not check his momentum.

He tried. He dug his heels into the sand. He screamed once, just before he slid into the writhing line. Then he exploded.

Cameron staggered from the second concussion, and in the ensuing silence tensed himself against falling debris. What goes up comes down. But nothing came, not even a button from Jorgeson's uniform.

There was utter silence except for the whisper of wind in dry, thin vegetation. The two dark men looked at each other.

In the stranger's eyes was dark sorrow, and his mouth was serious. In Cameron's heart was a touch of awe. Such things were impossible.

The stranger spoke first. "I haven't decided whether you're intelligent, soldier, or whether your reflexes are slow. Do you know?"

"What is it you want?" Cameron asked.

"Your cargo, of course. All seventeen crates of Baltex."

Cameron caught his breath. "How—"

"How do I know? That, my friend, would be telling. I do know, and that is the important fact. Will you stack the crates outside your ship? Then you may go. I'm sorry about the other two. They really suicided, though."

Cameron weighted the factors. He couldn't get through that diabolical screen, whatever it was. He couldn't escape, not in this tramp freighter. He shrugged.

"I guess you have me."

"You *are* intelligent!" the stranger exclaimed. "Then why in the name of Heaven are you still in a Center? Why aren't you with us?"

Cameron sneered. "With outlaws?"

The stranger's face lost animation. It became just a face. "Get at it, then!" he snapped.

Cameron lugged the crates one at a time out of the freight compartment and stacked them on the sand. After a half-hour of this, his uniform was splotched with sweat, his whole body wringing wet. He set the final crate atop the pile and faced the stranger.

"Now what?"

"Oh, on your way, soldier. Take back this message. If so much as one more woman is taken from outside any Center, the whole will suffer. Tell your superiors about this screen of contraterrene energy. It's impregnable. Maybe you can scare 'em, for their own good."

"They don't scare easy."

"They can die easily then."

Cameron looked at the dark stranger for some time, fixing each feature in his memory. He decided that there was little danger of forgetting him, for the man's features were like Cameron's own—wide, dark eyes, black hair, prominent nose, wide mouth, and a slim, wiry body.

"I'll see you some day," Cameron promised.

The dark stranger said nothing and Cameron presently shifted his eyes. He entered *Fleetfin* and took off.

When he was at cloud level he saw the stranger enter the long black craft. It maneuvered near the cargo, remained quietly until lost from sight.

"Somebody," Cameron said aloud, "will pay for this."

Every man on his force should be assigned to tracing the leak in some department along the production line. No, he reflected, the leak must be near the top, for the outlaw knew the nature and amount of cargo. He had intersected *Fleetfin's* course as unerringly as if he had written the sealed orders.

Tracing the leak was a one-man job and he should be the man. The big shots in Power Center would scream their silly heads off at the loss of their purchased cargo, and would try, perhaps, to toss Cameron to the council. But if he could produce a spy he should save himself and protect further secret cargo.

Another point in his report, he decided, would also create havoc. Women. He smiled grimly as his mind's ear picked up the anguished protests of entertainment tycoons. Without the vivacious, beautiful outlaw hostesses, the entertainment profits' curve was headed for a nose dive. They must agree to the outlaw's ultimatum, Cameron thought, for that screen was a definite menace.

He thought of the noise a man makes when he explodes, and shuddered. They'd have to stop their piracy, whether they liked it or not. No more raiding parties at night, no more spotting an outlaw camp, no more stalking a particular beauty along the path to a spring or river.

Cameron sighed. He'd had a lot of fun in the palaces of joy. It would be hard shrift to do without those colorful nights.

A warning signal on his klystron brought him back to the job of piloting. Plastic Center's shield was, according to meter reading, a thousand yards ahead. He searched through the pilot's papers for the collapse combination.

He found it and depressed eight numbered keys on the panel. He held these down and accelerated. When he had gone five thousand yards he released the keys. He was now well inside Plastic Center, and the earth below was a riot of irrigated green.

Far ahead were the pastel domes of Plastic 3.9, the outlying subsidiary of Plastic Prime. He passed over this and others at full speed, and was at the main landing port in an hour.

At ten o'clock on the following morning, Cameron left his apartment for the council chambers. He was thoughtful as a taxi whisked him over gleaming rooftops. He wasted no glance on the maelstrom of movement below, ordinarily a picture of æsthetic pleasure. He took no notice of the patterned movement of aircraft.

For he had been summoned to appear before the council.

Summoned.

So many others, he knew, had been summoned in this manner, and had been reduced to the status of ordinary citizen, doomed to perform the routine tasks of production—to run the machines that manufactured the products that other Centers wanted in trade for products that Plastic needed to augment its own. Ordinary citizen.

Then he shrugged. This must be an exceptional case. They wanted a report, perhaps. Or they wanted his testimony so that a criticism could be lodged against the guilty party—the leak.

He paid the taxi pilot, walked from the landing roof to a moving ramp and rode it to a lower level. He went down a deserted corridor—deserted because nobody came here unless ordered—to the council-chamber door. He stood on the identification plate until the door slid upward. He entered the chamber.

The council members looked at him gravely, their gravity accentuated by their formal robes of democracy. Cameron took the witness chair and faced them.

"Gentlemen, I am happy to see you. May I serve you?"

"Your offer," the bearded chairman intoned formally, "is most kind, and reciprocated." His manner changed. "What have you to say for yourself?"

Cameron blinked. "Say? For myself? What do you mean?"

A snicker circled the council table. Young and old, these elected members seemed to be amused at Cameron's question. Their amusement had a sinister overtone.

"We have evidence," the chairman explained, "which points to you as the person who gave information to the outlaws and co-operated with them in confiscating vital materials. Secondarily, you are indicated as the person who killed two useful citizens of Plastic Prime."

Cameron's jaw dropped. "But my report—"

"Has been examined, and the scene investigated. What did you do with the bodies?"

"They—exploded. I described it."

"Josh Cameron," the chairman said earnestly, "I must warn you that you are in a precarious position. The fantastic tale you spun only does you harm. We want the truth before we reach a decision." He held a thin hand palm outward. "Not that we shall not lodge a criticism. That has been decided. But the exact type of criticism will be determined by your defense."

"But you have the truth!" Cameron protested. "I wrote it out in detail."

Their laughter was hearty, but not gay. It cackled at him, sharply.

"Captain Jorgeson's last notation on his log," the chairman said, "was 'Cameron ordered me down.' That shows you were in collusion with the outlaws. What did you do with the bodies? If Captain Jorgeson and the pilot were taken captive, tell us. That would be believable, and would effect our criticism."

Cameron's jaw set. "I'm the chief of police. I have the interests of this Center at heart. Look at my record. Would I invent some tale? Have you any previous indication of disloyalty? You have not. I'm telling the truth."

"It is our opinion that you are lying."

"But why? Why? What could I gain?"

"That is what you will tell us."

"Listen," Cameron said. "On my honor I'm telling the truth. If I had been in collusion with the outlaws I wouldn't have come back. I'd have known you wouldn't believe me. But now you must. The whole thing happened as I said in my report. They have that weapon. You must believe me."

"As you describe the outlaw," the chairman said, "he appears to be a man of education and intelligence. Now, we know what the outlaws are. You can't expect us to accept the idealized portrait you drew."

"How about the women we've stolen?" Cameron demanded. "Are they brutish, moronic, giantesses? Do they look as if they eat their young?"

"We have no personal data on these women," the chairman said with dignity. "We do not habituate places in which they are said to be employed."

"You should!" Cameron snapped. He stamped out. At the door, he turned. He didn't say anything. He glared contemptuously for a moment before he went away.

Josh Cameron, ordinary citizen.

He was still Chief Cameron when he answered the summons at his apartment door, but when the heavy features of Captain Robert Fane filled the identity screen, he knew. He didn't see the accompanying soldiers, but he knew.

He twisted his mouth in bitter realization and touched the door control. Fane and his detail stepped inside, hands on their Payne coagulators.

"I am happy to see you," Cameron said. "May I be of service?"

Captain Fane mushed the formal answer. "Yourofferiskindandreciprocated." His blocky face set. "Where are the uniforms, guns and other properties of Plastic Center?" He threw a bundle at Cameron's feet. "There are your new clothes. I want what you are wearing."

Cameron touched a button in the master panel and the walls slid up from his clothes closet and arsenal. "All right," he said. "Have at it."

Fane purpled, jerked out his side arm. He leveled it at Cameron, who flinched in astonished alarm, then lowered it. His heavy face did not relax, but his words had a touch of informality.

"The next time you do not pay proper respect to your betters you will probably die."

Cameron bowed his head. It was hard, for he had not known this status before. He had been typed as an official at birth and had received homage all his life. He knew how to behave as an ordinary citizen, but the knowledge was intellectual, not instinctive. With effort, then, he bowed as befitted him.

"You are kind," he said. "My conduct was inexcusable, but I crave leniency. My new station is unfamiliar as yet."

"You won't get a second chance," Fane snapped. "Enough of this chatter—off with your clothes!"

While the soldiers gathered up his emblems of office and social rating, Cameron shucked out of his fine, soft garments of blue Nolyn and into Textile Center's standard product. When he was dressed, he waited.

He waited without resentment, eyes downcast. Without question, without objection as the soldiers cleared his wall tables. A pang of regret tore at him when they bundled his precious reading tapes and tossed them on the heap. But he said nothing.

Humility clothed him, all right, but a plan formed slowly in his head. He knew that a few days' grace were his while the military court decided on the niche he should fill in industry. The court had acted immediately on the criticism of the council—that was automatic. But judicial machinery ground slowly, and freedom of action—within established limits—would be his while they checked his aptitude and intelligence ratings and co-ordinated these with labor-type needs.

If he could run the spy to earth, the person who had notified the outlaws of that precious shipment of Baltex, and hale him before the council—he might be Chief Josh Cameron again.

So he bowed his head and listened with one ear to anticipated instructions. "You will be notified, Cameron, as to your job. In the meantime you know the restrictions on persons in your position. You will not attempt to leave Plastic Prime. You will not spend any money. You will not engage in any remunerative activity. The penalty, as you well know, is death."

Cameron did not raise his eyes when they left. He maintained his attitude of respect even after they had long since gone, but his brows furrowed in concentration.

He itemized in his mind the persons who might have known of *Fleetfin's* schedule and cargo. They amounted to a bare half dozen, and among them, he was convinced, was the traitor.

He could start his investigation at the top with Martin Grueter, or at the bottom with Loren Bradley. It would not occur to Captain Robert Fane that he would break parole. A clerk might, if reduced to ordinary citizen; a taxi driver might. But not an official who knew too well the ruthless aftermath of disobedience. This, Cameron thought, would be Fane's attitude. It would have been his own.

More than likely, then, he wouldn't be watched. He certainly wouldn't be reported by those on whom he proposed to call. They would automatically assume that he had permission.

He grinned faintly and punched a taxi summons. Then he went up on the roof and waited by the landing area until a small plane slipped out of the lower traffic lane.

"Hump yourself!" the driver snapped. "I ain't got all day."

Cameron whipped a hand to his hip, but grinned wryly as he touched rough brown cloth instead of the hard plastic of a coagulator.

"Sorry," he said, and jumped in before the driver could change his mind and dart away. "Take me to Factory 6," he ordered.

The driver did a slow burn. He turned, with sinister deliberation, a fact twisted by controlled fury. "'Take me to Factory 6!'" he mimicked savagely. "And does your excellency want me to wait? Just who do you think you are, scum? You deadheads gimme a oscillatin' ache. Sign this!"

He shoved a record pad at Cameron. Cameron scrawled a signature with the stylus. "You get paid for carrying me. Why all the screams?"

"It's your airs I don't like, scum. You'd think you was—" The driver broke off, screwed his face into an expression of half recognition. "Say. I've seen you before. You—" His expression altered to one of glee, with teeth. "Well, well! If it ain't the chief! Yessir, and will the boys love this! My, my! Demoted an' everything. A lot of people are going to dance tonight."

Cameron's dark face froze. He expected to be flicked on the raw to a certain extent, but there were limits. He said coldly, "I'll remember that when I get my uniform back."

The driver, in his turn, froze. Such a feat as Cameron predicted was rare, but not unknown. As everybody knew, a number of flat-mouthed taunters of similar unfortunates had been forced to eat their words—and found them fatally indigestible.

Yet it was not fear alone that flickered behind the hard surface of his eyes. There was surliness and smoldering hatred. Cops shoved you around. Cops told you when to go home. Cops commandeered your taxi if they felt like it. They were worse than soldiers, being underlings of the military.

The driver turned away, touched the drive, bank, and left keys on his panel and slipped into the local traffic flow. He cut out of the stream over Factory 6, drifted into the gleaming landing area and watched without comment as Cameron took a descending ramp into the squat building.

As Cameron had thought, he attracted no notice. Others in civilian-brown, clerk-gray, police-blue, military-red, and executive-purple looked through him as they went about their appointed tasks. They didn't see him.

He stood on the identification plate of Martin Grueter's office until the hearty voice boomed: "Son of an artist, look who's here!" and the door slid up.

Grueter was in the middle of a conference with underlings in gray and purple, but Cameron's entrance disrupted the business at hand. All faces turned smiling toward the door.

The smiles, one after another, became fixed, then faded.

"I am happy to—" the white-headed Grueter began. He broke off as he noted Cameron's costume. His kind mouth set, his eyes steadied, hardened.

"Get out of here," he said quietly.

Cameron's eyes touched on each member of the group and found no friendliness. Not even in Ann Willis, whom he knew well.

Her eyes, the same purple as her brief tunic, were as hard as Grueter's, who repeated, still quietly:

"Get out of here."

"Listen to me, Martin," Cameron said quickly. "I've been discharged on false evidence. You can help. I've got to—"

"Get out of here."

"Somebody tipped off the—"

"Get—OUT!"

The eyes had changed, subtly. Cameron understood. They had tolerated his entrance because of past relations. From their viewpoint the amenities had been observed. Any further intrusion from him and one of them would kill him.

He bowed his head. "I crave leniency. An error."

He backed out into the corridor and the door slid shut.

He stood thoughtful while the stream of workers and officials flowed around him, trying to decide on his next move. He felt no blame for Grueter or Ann. With others present they dared not show him more courtesy than they would any other citizen. The social gap must be maintained.

But if he caught one of them alone—

He walked down a short corridor, around a right-angled turn, to Ann Willis' office. He could wait, unobserved.

He stood at the window, as if watching the movement of planes on the loading field below was his assignment. Among these was *Fleetfin,* into which brown-clad men and women lugged small square crates. Cameron wondered if this was another shipment of Baltex; wondered, too, what Baltex might be and why it was so expensive.

Only a few crates were shipped to Power Center each month, and paid for more public and official planes than in any of the other Centers. A few of the factories in Textile Center, for example, were always taxed to capacity, turning out the tithe to Power. Textile Center traffic, according to espionage reports, was three point two per cent below Plastic. Food and Luxury Centers averaged slightly more, but they worked twenty-four hours a day.

What was the precious stuff, then, and what did Power Center do with it? Oh, well, it was their secret, and none had divined it—unless the outlaws knew.

The outlaws knew a great deal, as Cameron was beginning to suspect. He had not bothered his head particularly about them before—that was out of his province. As long as they stayed in the unmapped areas between Centers, and as long as they did not encroach upon his personal comforts, he regarded them much as everyone else—unlettered savages living like beasts. But he had never really believed in the stories of cannibalism.

After his unfortunate meeting with the dark stranger, though, thoughts of the outlaws had busied his mind to a considerable degree. The man was not savage, illiterate, brutal, cannibalistic. He did not fit at all into descriptions circulated by the Bureau of Information.

For the first time in his life, Cameron felt uneasy as he considered the eternal verities he had been taught since he entered School for Officials. The feeling was not one of doubt—not yet. He was simply uneasy as shadowy questions swirled unformed in his head.

Was the man an outlaw? Was he from some other Center, pirating the most valuable product in the United States? It seemed unlikely, for he had laid down an ultimatum. No more women for Luxury Center.

In addition, the weapon he had used pointed to his being an outlaw, for if any other Center possessed that secret it would soon rule the others as Power Center had ruled before the collapse of Jorg Duvain's dictatorship.

Cameron flushed with anger as he thought of that invisible—and apparently invincible—screen. He must look into that. At his leisure if he could produce the spy who, he felt certain, was in this factory. If he failed in this he must produce proof of the weapon in order to vindicate himself before the council.

Cameron stood for almost an hour at the window. Orderly confusion on the loading field held half his attention. The other half was on the corridor.

When he heard footsteps he half turned so as to see whoever came around the corner and at the same time seem vigilant on his extemporaneous self-assignment. They came briskly clicking along the Neoplast floor, and brought slim-legged Ann Willis into view. Cameron turned full toward her then and waited.

When she recognized him she halted, frozen-eyed. Her pose, Cameron thought, was not indicative of displeasure—she listened, rather. She held herself tense and still for a full five seconds before she allowed her lips to relax.

"You're being foolish," she said softly. "But come in."

He followed her inside and took a chair at her invitation. He waited for a formal greeting and was somewhat surprised when she plunged briskly into conversation. True, he was an ordinary citizen, in brown, but she knew better. She knew he had worn police-blue all his life.

"What do you want?" she asked curtly.

Cameron told her. "There is a spy somewhere close to the top here. He has cost me my job. I have, as you know, a day or two at least in which to find him. I want to know who knew of *Fleetfin's* schedule and cargo. One of the names on that list will be a spy."

"How many names do you know?" she asked.

"Four. Grueter, Captain Jorgeson, the pilot, myself. There must be others. I'm not the spy. Jorgeson and the pilot died in defense of the cargo, and I hardly think Grueter would fit."

"What was the cargo?"

Cameron's eyes narrowed. "Don't you know?" he asked, astonished.

"I'm not in traffic."

"Then I don't know who else."

She was quiet, tapping coral nails on her desk. Her eyes turned a deeper purple with thought. Presently, she looked at him for a long time.

"You were tried," she said, "and found guilty."

Cameron snorted. "Tried! I was *informed* that I'd been found guilty."

She shrugged this away. "You have broken your parole."

"But it won't matter if I can prove my innocence. You know that."

"I know that you have been found guilty by a legal court. I know that it is my duty to report you."

Cameron's jaw dropped. "What's got into you, Ann? We were friends. You know you'd be sending me to my death."

Her gaze did not waver, her mouth did not relax. She continued to tap the shining desk top.

"I am first of all a loyal citizen of Plastic Prime. Whatever threatens it in any way is dangerous, from my viewpoint. You've broken rules of behavior."

"But they won't even ask questions if a report comes from you! I'll be dead in three seconds."

"As you should be."

As Ann Willis reached for her phone, Cameron acted instinctively. With one hand he slapped her fingers from the instrument and with the other, even as she reached for her coagulator, he hit her on the chin.

All his strength, backed by the momentum of his leap, went into the blow, and she dropped to the floor.

He stripped off her side arm then examined her for life. He found that he had not broken her neck as he had thought at first. And he knew that he should have.

He stood, looking down at her lithe slenderness. Alive, she was his own death warrant. Therefore, she should die. He picked up the coagulator.

He didn't point it. He knew that he would not. He knew, in a surge of self-contempt, that he could not. Some atavistic reversion, no doubt, and all the more contemptible for that. His contemplation of the girl was not æsthetic. He wasted no appreciation of her curves. He felt only that he was a fool.

If he didn't kill her he should have to run for it. Where? He could hide in Luxury Center for a while, but nowhere else. As soon as she recovered she would send Josh Cameron's personal data to all Centers, but authorities in Luxury were lax. They'd make a half-hearted search in the tourist spots and then wait for him to show himself.

He told himself that she must be killed or his own life was forfeit. He told himself this several times. Yet he did not move his arm, did not aim the weapon.

No, he was going to let her live, and eventually bring him to death. For, even though a trip to Luxury, provided he could get out of Plastic, would offer brief respite, he could not find the spy. The spy was here, and without an ally on the ground Cameron could not run him to earth. He could have no ally. He, ordinary citizen, had struck the purple uniform. All hands were now against him.

With some despair and hopelessness he began to search the office for a disguise. In her closet hung several of her own outfits, but he could wear none of these. Not that he couldn't masquerade as a woman—though rather flat-chested; he could do it, but not in these costumes. For any woman with knees like his would wear a long tunic. Let him appear in public as a female with these knobs exposed and even a child would know something was wrong.

One course was open. It was one of desperation, but he could not pick and choose. He searched her desk, found a small scissors, and cut a purple star from her skirt. He pinned this to the belt of his shorts and slung the coagulator on his hip. He was a reasonable facsimile of an executive messenger, and the weapon gave authority to the disguise.

He took her purple pass from her tunic pocket, stowed it in one of his own. Then he tied and gagged Ann Willis. He was careful about this. He needed about thirty minutes to catch the next passenger plane. After he was aboard, it mattered little when she was free and conscious. When the alarm went out they would go first to his own apartment. By the time they had checked the ports he should be lost in the pleasure-seekers of Luxury Center.

So he tied her well.

When the plane had been clear of Plastic Center's shield for an hour, Cameron had examined each of the passengers and was satisfied that he was free of suspicion. A few eyes had looked at him with interest, but when they touched on his makeshift star and coagulator, they had become blank with acceptance of things ordinary.

One pair only shifted back to him now and then, but these were red-rimmed from caltra, and Cameron felt sympathy for their twisted owner—if he felt anything. The young man wore the honorary purple of those who had not been warned in time that the drug was not harmless, as advertised, and Cameron attached no importance to the glances directed at him. Caltra victims did strange things.

His complacence was shattered somewhat when the young man staggered along the aisle to the empty seat beside Cameron and fell into it. Cameron's desire to be left alone was passive, but it shrieked along jittery nerves. Yet he controlled himself, took his cue.

"I am happy to see you," he said respectfully. "May I offer my service?"

The young man clipped out the formal reply. Then, "Been watching you," he said.

Cameron's dark face remained placid. "Yes?"

"You want a job?"

Cameron examined the red-rimmed eyes for signs of double meanings. Then he touched his purple star.

"I have a job."

The young man shrugged this away. "Delivering a message isn't a career. I'll fix it so I can hire you. I'll pay you in money, not credits."

Cameron murmured, "You tempt me," and began a tale of fanciful reasons why he was not free to take any employment from a private source while he concentrated on this unexpected situation. With an eye on the Sierras, over which they were flying westward, he spun a smooth tale of his own importance in the scheme of things.

His private thought had a tone of hopelessness. If this young man were determined to hire him, for whatever purpose, Cameron could not stall beyond a certain point. He could not prevent inquiries, not in civilian brown. And he could not allow inquiries—and live.

The young man interrupted his tale. "Don't be a fool! Any half-wit can replace you. I like your looks and can pay more than your job pays. What's your name, and who employs you?"

Cameron touched his star again. "I claim secrecy."

The young man bowed. "That is your privilege. But what is your name?"

"Jay—Cameron."

"J for what? John?"

"Jay. J-a-y."

"All right, Jay Cameron. What are you paid?"

Cameron named a reasonable sum.

"I'll double it," the young man said.

"For what? What would I do?"

"Help me. Accompany me. Protect me, if necessary. I am headed for dangerous territory."

Cameron raised his eyebrows. The young man leaned near and whispered, "I'm going into outlaw country."

Cameron shook his head. "I don't want to be disenfranchised. I'm a loyal citizen."

This was the normal reaction, and his companion seemed to find it so. "Sure, sure," he said impatiently. "So am I. But I'm also a man, and I don't like my physical condition. It happened through no fault of mine. I was told caltra was non-habit-forming—which is true—and that it was harmless—which was a foul lie."

"But Food Center didn't know that," Cameron pointed out, "when they offered it as a substitute for morphine."

"The effect was the same—on me. I'm not sore at anybody. I just want to be cured."

"But there is no cure. The effects are permanent."

The young man smiled. "I saw a case— Never mind. I'll tell you *when* you're working for me. What do you say?"

Cameron saw a way out. "I'm going to Luxury," he said, "on business. After I've finished I can talk to you."

"Good! I'll meet you at . . . oh, you name it."

"Rosie's?"

"On the canal side? Right. My name, by the way, is Harvey Willis. Plastic Prime."

Cameron shriveled a little. Willis. Plastic Prime. Intellectually, he felt certain that Ann Willis and this twisted wreck had nothing but the accident of name in common. But the emotional shock, since he had violated her purple sanctity a short hour before, almost destroyed his composure. He was quiet for a few moment until his hands relaxed.

Not only, he reflected, would he not meet this man in Rosie's, but he would also throw a scare into him, make him wish to forget Josh Cameron.

"It is my duty to report you, Mr. Willis. You're planning a violation of the law."

Willis smiled tolerantly. "They wouldn't do anything to me. I'm a caltra victim. You know that I'm immune. But aside from ethical considerations, Cameron, let me ask you something. Are you color-blind?"

Cameron's jaw dropped. "Huh?"

"You've probably forgotten an important fact," Willis went on obscurely. "That fact is the varied effect of caltra. It does strange things to its victims. It has made me superhumanly sensitive to gradations in color. And so—" He leaned nearer and whispered, "I know that your messenger's star is a phony."

Cameron's face didn't move.

"Your complexion," Willis went on pleasantly, "is a trifle whiter. I tell you honestly, Cameron, I can read these signs. I don't need to be a psychologist. You're scared. You know, of course, that it is *my* duty to report *you*."

"Go ahead."

Willis screwed up his face. "Your tone sounds all right to me. If I were blind I'd say I'd made a mistake. But there's an additional whiteness. You see, my approach was not impulsive. I didn't pick you without a great deal of thought. First of all, I noticed the star. It's almost the same shade as the bona fide, but not quite. So I knew you were disguised. Now anyone wearing brown who will take such a desperate measure is not only in trouble, but he has initiative and courage. I may have need of those qualities. And you can't refuse me, Cameron. A word from me and you'll be held at the landing port."

"But you took caltra, and are, therefore, crazy."

"True. But they will investigate you, nonetheless, with many apologies. 'Merely routine,' they will say. 'We hope you won't hold it against us, because you are an executive messenger on a mission of importance?' Can you stand investigation, Cameron?"

Cameron smiled wryly. "Caltra didn't impair your argumentative faculties. At Rosie's, then?"

"I think," Willis said, "we'd better not separate. You aren't on an executive mission, or any other kind. If you get away from me I may never see you again. I could get someone else at Luxury, of course, but I'd rather have you, for reasons I've stated."

Cameron frowned. "You put me in a bad position. If you should be right—assume it for the sake of argument—and I admit it, you have a hold over me which might cost me my life. If I deny it you'll cause me to be held up, and maybe cost me my job. You'll interfere with my mission, in any event."

Willis shrugged. "You must make the choice."

Cameron brooded out the window. They had left the Sierras behind and in a few moments would arrive at the canal-striped city, Luxury Prime. Before that time he must come to a decision. Not a decision on his course of action, for Willis had him. He must string along.

No, he had no choice there. What he needed now was a story, one that would salvage something of independence and self-respect. He considered plausible lies. He could say, for example, that the circumstances which Willis had created forced him to accede to the young man's demands. If he were held for investigation, his mission would be unsuccessful and he would lose his job. Therefore, he would be better off to grab Willis' offer and thus save a means of livelihood. No, that was weak.

He turned to Willis. He had a story now. "I'll have to trust you."

Willis made a gesture. "That's up to you." He seemed amused.

"No," Cameron said. "I must. Will you swear by the purple to treat it confidentially?"

"Surely. I swear."

"Then lean closer. I must whisper." He did so. "I am not an executive messenger. You were quite right. Nor am I a civilian. I have a right to wear another color. I am on a highly secret errand, and as long as your route coincides with mine I'll go with you."

"Why," Willis asked, "the artificial star? If you're on official business you could get the real thing."

"And fill out an application for anybody to see?" Cameron smiled. "Not much. Only one other person knows what I'm about. You're the third."

Willis was apparently convinced. Cameron had no way of knowing the mental reservations the young man made. He had to accept Willis' vows of secrecy, his protestations of belief, his offers of assistance.

He watched Willis stagger back to his seat with the peculiar gait of the caltra victim and tried to still the uneasiness which threatened to engulf him.

Red was the hue of hunting. The military were after somebody and Cameron thought he knew the name. Though he had been bitter, upon arrival at Luxury, at the liaison he was unable to avoid, he soon had reason to bless it.

For the pleasure palaces were no sooner lighted and opened for the evening than red uniforms added their sinister note to the general gaiety. Alone, Cameron reflected, he should have been questioned. But he was employed and his employer could answer questions.

Chief among his blessings, then, were the ravages of caltra upon Harvey Willis. Nobody bothered to question. If he wanted a valet—and Cameron became obviously that—they assumed he had the permission of authority. Additionally, the general attitude toward caltra sufferers imparted a certain immunity to formality. The guy must be nuts. No telling what he'd say.

So the search swirled and eddied around Cameron. At the gaming tables, where Willis won a tidy sum on a Galactic Wheel; on the canals, where their power canoe was unmolested; at Rosie's and similar houses, where their badinage with former outlaw girls was uninterrupted.

The soldiers gave them casual glances—and passed on. Cameron ached to question one, to learn if the net was out in all Centers for him, if Ann Willis had spread the word, if he were to be killed on sight. He was morally certain that such was the case, and shrank inwardly each time a military eye raked him. His star and weapon he had discarded upon arrival. They would be the focal point of the search. He had thrown the star away and hidden the coagulator under his shirt.

He strove with all his faculties to maintain the appearance of a hired companion to Willis on a pleasure tour of the spots. He steadied the young man as they roved about this hall or that; he helped him into hired canoes when they moved on to another; he held their pace down to the leisured movement of Luxury Center, so snaillike in comparison to other Centers.

Here, efficiency was subordinated to enjoyment. In Luxury Prime, all business was directed toward comfort of visitors. Proprietors bowed and pleasantly relieved gamblers of their vacation funds. Canoe chauffeurs were vocal upon the beauties of their environment. Girls in the licensed houses were gentle, intelligent, and as willing to argue economic, astronomical or mathematical problems as to engage in any other pastime.

Nothing was allowed to mar the periodical visits of customers. Here were no actors, artists, or other social nonentities. They were segregated in subsidiary communities. From Luxury 1 emanated all stereocasts; Luxury 2 produced such sculpture as this or that Center required; and so on. Those who were doomed to a life of artistic endeavor kept their places. They did not mingle even with ordinary citizens.

Nothing, then, should have prevented Cameron from enjoying himself, once he was satisfied that the military was apparently not suspicious of him. But Harvey Willis worried him. Drifting with seeming aimlessness from place to place, the young man led them gradually toward a section not frequented by tourists. This was a district of small private bars, designed for the army of workers and officials who lived in Luxury Prime.

Not that one was ever cautioned not to enter its environs. No, one was allowed to enter all right. And having entered, was tolerated. Nobody contributed to the casual visitor's entertainment. He could buy a drink and drink it alone. Nobody was interested in how much money he spent.

"We don't belong down here," Cameron said as he helped Willis from a canoe to a gloomy sidewalk.

Willis expressed surprise. "Why not? The places are open for business."

Cameron explained.

"I have special privileges," Willis said lightly. "I don't imagine there'll be a row. Besides, I have to arrange my journey down here."

Cameron pulled the young man to a halt. "Look here, I'd like to know what's up. If I'm to be involved I'd like to know in what."

"I told you," Willis said softly, "I'm going into outlaw country—to be cured."

"But that's impossible. I'm sorry but it is. You're due to be duped."

"I know the popular theory," Willis said impatiently. "But there's a doctor, an outlaw, who has figured out a cure."

"Outlaws," Cameron scoffed, "know nothing of medicine. Besides, he could get amnesty if he had something like that. He could move right into Food Center's medical department."

Willis motioned toward a small bar, dimly lighted, and Cameron helped him to the door. "Has it ever occurred to you," Willis asked as they approached, "that he might not *want* to go back?"

"God, no!"

The bar was deserted save for a rotund barkeep with a laughter-scarred face and a paunch. He and Willis went through an elaborate ritual of greeting before the two men sat at a small table. The bartender wiped its spotless plastic top with an immaculate cloth and said:

"Gentlemen, I know you're visitors, but I like the set of you. Tell you what. I'm the only bar owner in the country with a little Scotch. Would you like a drink of it?"

Cameron had heard of the liquor from his grandfather, who had boasted that the Camerons had once made it, so long ago in Scotland that the date was forgotten. His dark face lighted with remembered excitement.

Willis likewise signified his acceptance, and two small glasses of amber liquid presently sat before them, each ringed with a necklace of tiny bubbles. Cameron sipped.

"Tastes like smoke."

Willis closed his red-rimmed eyes after a taste. "That, friend Cameron, is a drink with character. It's warplanes slipping grimly through the night, it's a storm with sand in its teeth, it's a pardon from the High Court. I like."

The liquid was filled with an intimate flame, warming Cameron's stomach. He relaxed and seemed to view with great clarity his own situation. He tossed the remainder into his throat and looked at Willis with determination.

"I'm a coward," he announced. "I'm running away. Me, a Cameron. I'm not running any longer, though. I'm going back."

"To what?" Willis asked sardonically. "I'll tell you. Death."

Cameron flung up his head, nostrils flaring. "I can take 'em on, one at a time, or all together. I'll use strategy, cunning, and finesse. I'll expose the spy. I'll prove I had nothing to do with the dirty outlaws. They can't do this to me! Then, when I'm chief again, I'll deal with the outlaws. You'll see, you'll—"

He slumped forward on the table and the bartender came across the room.

"You haven't killed him?" Willis asked.

The bartender's paunch jiggled and his big face creased along worn lines. He chuckled.

"Lord, no! He'll have a head big as a pylon dome when he comes to, but he'll live."

"What did you give him, for heavens' sake? It took him almost as quickly as a coagulator. Speaking of which—"

Willis took Cameron's weapon, questioning eyes on the bartender.

"A long time ago, Mr. Willis, it was called a Mickey Finn. People used to drink 'em." He shook his head sadly. "Those must have been the good old days, when men were really men."

"Is everything all set?"

"The boys ought to be here in a couple of minutes. You did all right, Mr. Willis. Pier is going to be pleased."

Willis shrugged. "Did Ann call in?"

"Yup. I wrote down the Shield combination. Says she's got a sore jaw. He must've slugged her."

"I don't know. She called me at the last minute, said to take the Luxury plane and capture Cameron. What were all the soldiers doing tonight?"

"Rumor that Pier's in town, I guess. We get 'em every few days. A couple were in here. Gave me six credits to tip them off before anybody else."

They were still chuckling when a quartet of men came in silently from the rear. With quiet, unhurried efficiency, they carried Cameron away. They accommodated their pace to Willis until they reached a large power canoe. They piloted this at normal speed along the canal to a dark, deserted stretch. Here they hid the canoe and carried Cameron across a field to a long, rakish craft which was rising slowly from an underground hangar.

When Cameron opened his eyes, some time later, one fact registered before vast aches and pains invaded his consciousness. The face of the pilot was that of the dark stranger who had robbed *Fleetfin* of her precious Baltex.

Somewhere in the Pacific. That was all Cameron knew about the island to which they took him.

It was broad and long and green. He could see all this as they circled high above it at dawn of the following morning. It was apparently deserted. Bright-green vistas, craggy brown hills and curved white beaches met his eye through the observation port of the outlaw craft.

That was all he knew, aside from the fact that the dark lean pilot was Pier Duvain, outlaw chieftain, and that Harvey Willis was also a personage among the outlaws. They told him nothing except to be quiet.

He found this command easy to obey for his head was filled with pain and each movement brought a myriad stabs to his joints. Even thinking was agony.

So he took what restless slumber came his way, and in the foggy dawn looked down on the island. Were they going to drop him there, with no company save its native animals and insects? If so, why? What was he to them?

The lean plane knifed through the fog toward thick green trees and settled to earth in a small clearing. From the sides of this men came running with armloads of greenery, and before Cameron was ordered to disembark the craft was covered with an effective screen of leaves. From above it was surely undetectable.

He was escorted without comment into the forest, expecting anything but what he saw.

For here was a modern city, modeled along the lines of those Cameron had know all his life, yet with subtle differences. The buildings were designed to blend into their surroundings and were protectively colored. The streets followed the natural contours of slopes and valleys, and looked like swaths of vegetation.

The principal difference was a *feel* of camaraderie. Hundreds of persons were abroad, even at this early hour, and they looked at you. That was the keynote—their eyes met yours. They didn't glance furtively at your costume, ready to salute if necessary, and quickly away. Their eyes were full of candor.

They spoke, too, in casual greeting. They said, "Hello."

"Hello, Pier," they called to the outlaw chief. And, "Hey, Harvey," to Willis. "Haven't seen you in a long time."

Nor did these people look brutal, or barbarous, as Cameron would have expected. They were like anybody else save for their spirit of banter and their proud glances.

Cameron was still with wonder and a reorganization of conditioned ideas. He had been taught thus and so about the outlaws; what he saw did not confirm the teaching. He was confused and went quietly with his escort.

They led him into a long low building with opaque plastic walls, down a corridor bright with synthetic sunlight to a room which was built around a council table. It was obvious that this room played an important part in outlaw affairs, and Cameron studied it.

He had seen its counterpart, generally speaking, in all the Centers. His own office had been so constructed. But there were differences here, too, as there were in the people. This plastic had never come from Plastic Center; nor the floor covering from Textile; nor was the lighting characteristic of Power's product.

Pier Duvain dismissed the two crew members who had accompanied them, waved Cameron and Willis to chairs, and sat across the polished table. His dark eyes held surface amusement, but fires glowed deeply, and his tone was not as casual as his words.

"I suppose you'd like to ask some questions."

Cameron twisted his mouth. "Fat lot of good it would probably do."

"Oh, yes," Duvain said. "You'll get answers. Correct, too. We'll be glad to tell you anything."

Cameron leaned forward. "All right. I'll ask you a question. What are you intending to do with me?"

Duvain's eyes were steady, unblinking, though not unpleasant. "That depends on you, and is not a subject to concern us yet."

"Depends on me? How?"

"We won't discuss it. Anything else, however, I'm willing to talk about for—" He glanced at a wall clock. "For twenty minutes."

"Where are we?" Cameron asked.

"On an island in the Pacific."

"I could see that." Cameron's voice rose. "You'll tell me everything, you say. So I ask about what most concerns me, and you tell me nothing. Suppose I don't ask questions. Suppose I just listen."

Harvey Willis turned red-rimmed eyes and a conciliatory smile on Cameron. "Now, now, friend, no need to get worked up."

"You and your outlaw doctor!" Cameron grated.

Willis shrugged. "I had to tell you something. That was as good as anything else."

"There isn't any doctor?"

Willis hesitated. "I wouldn't say that, exactly. Let's say, rather, that he has not been successful as yet."

His captors were silent while Cameron frowned at his folded hands. They waited, courteous but at ease, as if he were an honored guest. Presently he raised his eyes to Duvain's.

"Look here, I'm confused. This seems to be more than a matter of accident or coincidence. For some reason you intercepted me and brought me here. Why me?"

"We need men like you, Josh Cameron. You have qualities of leadership. If you have other qualities as well, you can be of assistance."

"In what?"

"In overthrowing the master-slave system in the Centers. In making all men equal."

"You're insane!" Cameron said.

"Do you really believe that, Cameron? Truly?"

Cameron studied the dark lean face. He remembered his first impression as Duvain came toward *Fleetfin* from his own plane; remembered the vitality, the arrogance, the self-assurance. These characteristics were more pronounced here at close range and were subordinate to some calm determination that radiated from steady eyes. Insane? Surely not.

"Well," Cameron hedged, "what else would you call such a proposition?"

"You could call it fair. You could call it just."

Cameron vented a short explosive sound of derision. "You sound like . . . when was it? . . . the eighteenth, twenty-first, or some other early century. All men equal! Fat chance!"

The outlaw was pleased. "You know history?"

Cameron remembered his pangs as Captain Robert Fane had confiscated his reading tapes. He didn't mention them. "A little," he said.

"Good! You won't have to go through elementary training then. You know that there was a time when a man's costume, or badge, or whatever, did not rigidly limit him to a certain social class. You remember?"

"They outgrew it, though," Cameron replied.

"Didn't they just!" Willis put in bitterly. "Look at me. I have a special purple. So I'm useless—because of the uniform and not because of actual disability. There are many productive jobs I could handle, but because I have this shade of uniform I'm barred from them. Look at you. You're in civilian brown. Are you the same man you were?"

Cameron frowned. "From the standpoint of the State, no. I'm not the same. I have no authority any more."

"Are you the same character, though? The same personality?"

"We-e-el," Cameron said. "I suppose so. Listen, I see where your argument is leading, and I can't refute it on your grounds. But I still say it's wrong. We've been going along pretty well for several hundred years in this way."

Willis spread his twisted hands, palms upward, and shrugged his shoulders. "What was good enough for father is good enough for you, eh? I can't argue with stupidity."

Cameron flushed, rose to his feet. "Quit patronizing me. I'm not a child, but I'm not a half-crazy idealist, either. I don't subscribe to your theory. My primary interest in you is what you're going to do with me. I'm your prisoner. Why do you bother to argue? I wouldn't if our positions were reversed."

"Sit down, Cameron," Duvain said quietly. "I thought you were intelligent enough to see the justice in our project. I still believe you are, but you'll need to shed the master-slave conditioning first. We're not going to do anything with you. You're at liberty."

Cameron remained on his feet. "I can go back?"

"To what?" Willis asked. "You'll be shot down for breaking parole."

He was right, Cameron reflected. Unless—

"Yes," Cameron admitted, while a plan formed in his mind. If he were in a position to bargain, if he could expose the outlaws, they wouldn't shoot him down. "I suppose you're right," he said with pretended despair. "I can't go back, I guess. Well, you say you want me to help overthrow the Centers. How do you propose to go about it—and when?"

Duvain and Willis looked steadily at each other. There was tension between them, conflict. Friendly, yes, but deep and unyielding. Duvain's dark eyes were like black plastic; Willis', blobs of blue, circled with red.

"We have a difference of opinion," Duvain answered. "One faction advocates violence, a quick thrust at the military. But another, headed by myself, contends that we should merely substitute one evil with another in that way. I have no definite plan to offer as yet, but I believe there is a way aside from killing off the opposition."

"Look at Cameron," Willis broke in. "You can't educate him. Oh, in time you could, perhaps. But there are millions like him. It would take forever."

Cameron was astonished. "Who's the boss here, anyway?"

"I am nominally the president," Duvain answered. "But each member of our organization has an equal vote."

"That's appalling!" Cameron exclaimed. "You'll never accomplish anything. What kind of business do you call that?"

"We call it Democracy, Cameron."

"Rubbish," Cameron said. "Democracy is what we operate under in the Centers."

Both Willis and Duvain loosed explosive laughter.

"We have a United States Congress, don't we?" Cameron said. "We have a council in each Center, don't we? They're elected by the people."

Duvain rose, a friendly smile on his dark face. "I wish I had time at the moment to argue the point, but I haven't. I hesitate to leave you with Harvey because he'll convert you to his creed of violence. But—"

Cameron interrupted heatedly. "Why will anybody necessarily convert me to anything? I'm an individual, the same as you. Aside from theories, though, I don't believe you could conquer the Centers. You're not strong enough."

"I'll set you straight on that right now," Duvain snapped. "Within twelve hours we could be in absolute control of all Centers. We are strong enough. This island is only our capital, so to speak. There are millions of us on the mainland, nomadic tribes living between Centers. Oh, we could conquer, all right."

"Then why don't you?"

"We have a difference of opinion as to procedure. But we're in no terrific rush. The Centers will still be there when we're ready."

"You can't break through their Shields."

"We have. We do. We can." Duvain glanced at the clock again. "I must go."

"I'd like to ask one more question," Cameron said. "How do you get through? How did you know about that shipment of Baltex?"

Duvain smiled, flicking his eyes at Willis. "Harvey's sister knows about such things."

"Ann Willis?" Cameron exclaimed. "So she's the spy! No wonder she was going to turn me over to the military. But how—"

"She wasn't," Willis cut in. "When she reached for the phone she was going to call me. But when you hit her she decided to play unconscious and give you a chance to get away. You tied her almost too well. I barely made that plane."

"But what if I'd gone somewhere else?"

"We had the other ports covered."

Duvain said impatiently, "Look around, Cameron. See how we live. I'll see you tonight."

Cameron looked at Harvey Willis after Duvain was gone. "Well? What do I do now?"

Willis shrugged. "Whatever you like."

Cameron marveled a little at their indifference. In one of the Centers—in Plastic for example—he would not have been willing to let a prisoner wander. He thought again that if the conditions were reversed—if he were the captor and Willis or Duvain the captive—another death would have been recorded before this.

He had this nebulous idea of escape. If, he reflected, he could expose Ann Willis, he might get back his job. He needed more information than he had now, for it would be his word against hers, and she was an executive. He needed proof of that destructive screen which he had seen in action.

"So you're the head of the violent faction?" he asked Willis.

Willis apparently did not sense that Cameron was merely making conversation. He treated the question seriously, clasping his hands in that odd manner necessitated by their twisted condition.

"Yes, but I admit that I may be wrong. Pier has a great deal on his side."

"Ah?"

"You, for example, friend Cameron."

Cameron frowned. "I don't get it."

Willis smiled with faint amusement. "You don't see it? You were discharged, according to the rules and regulations of our culture. But you rebelled."

"I rebelled? Against what?"

"The master-slave set-up. You didn't take your medicine like a loyal citizen. You set out to prove your innocence. To that degree, you rebelled against the culture."

"But the charges were false!"

"Who believes that, besides you? Haven't you seen others discharged when our obsolete councils lodged a criticism against them? Haven't you accepted that procedure as just?"

"Yes, but—"

"But you're different, eh? And so you are. You rebelled. You were an outlaw from the moment you decided to reinstate yourself. You *are* an outlaw." Willis flared twisted fingers as Cameron formed a hot protest. "Think it over, Cameron. Look around. Go through our streets. Watch us. Then make up your mind."

The differences Cameron had noted upon arrival—differences in attitude, architecture, and general feeling—between the outlaw capital and any Center were more apparent as he walked leisurely along the green streets which must look like grass from the air.

He did not enter any of the low, chameleonlike buildings. From some of these came sounds, as if those inside were manufacturing some article or another. Time to look into that later. At the moment he was interested in the people.

They wore a variety of dress, designed apparently to blend into the natural environment. The patterns were not standard, nor were social classes discernible as in the Centers. All walked as equals.

Cameron was distinctly uncomfortable in this unnatural absence of formality. When he was greeted pleasantly by some stranger who walked and talked like an executive, it was with effort that he restrained himself from saluting. He wanted to get away from this place.

He did so. He followed one of the streets paved with that strange substance as hard and smooth as Textile Center's best, which curved along the base of a hill and came to an abrupt end at the forest edge. A path slanted off from this point and Cameron followed it into the quiet green gloom.

It took him through thick trees and between walls of underbrush. As he walked he pondered his situation. He was conscious of heavy odors and bird movements in trees about him, and though these were strange and would have been exciting under other conditions, he kept his eye on the rising path and pulled his brows together in thought.

Pier Duvain, he suddenly realized, was the answer to all his problems. If he could turn the outlaw chief over to constituted authorities, Cameron might ask what he wished of any Center. Pier Duvain was their big headache. Cure it, Cameron reflected, and any job he liked was his.

Accomplishment of this project presented difficulties, to be sure, but was all the more worth consideration. Cameron doubted his ability to capture the outlaw and return him go the mainland, but if he, Cameron, could escape by one means or another, he could lead authorities to this island.

He marched on, upward, oblivious of the occasional bird he flushed, or the occasional rabbit that fled into the underbrush, until he reached the top of the path. He stopped and caught his breath.

A beach on the eastern side of the island shone in morning sunlight below him. Moored to a pier, apparently unguarded, were several sleek water craft. Here was a means of escape!

He stood motionless, examining the pier and the boats for signs of life. He saw none, heard nothing but rustlings of the forest, faint *slap-slap* of waves against the plastic pilings. He began the descent along the twisting path.

Every nerve was strained. He strove to detect life aboard the craft, for it was incredible that they should be unguarded. He sifted all sound that came to him, and though much of it fell strangely upon his urban ears his instinct labeled it as strictly natural.

When he stood at the bottom of the path he searched the curving beach and the hill behind for watchers. Then he hailed the pier.

"Hello!" he called. "Anybody home?"

His shout cut off all bird cries, and an utter, weird stillness fell around him for a few seconds. Then the normal sounds began again and Cameron decided to make a run for the pier. If any unseen guard was behind him he might be able to make a quick escape. If he encountered anyone on the boats or pier he would adapt his actions to circumstances.

As he struck out through low bushes he frightened a cottontail rabbit. The little animal streaked ahead of Cameron as a shout rang out behind him.

"Stop!" a thin voice cried.

Cameron plunged ahead. He saw the rabbit jump erratically to one side, then back, and it seemed to him that it cried out in terror as he rushed toward it. Then it leaped straight for the beach—and vanished in a small but brilliant flash with a sharp *crack* like an explosion.

Cameron knew what had happened. He remembered the screen of invisible death into which Captain Jorgeson and the pilot of *Fleetfin* had plunged. Here was another. He tried to stop. He dug his heels in the slick grass. He slid. He threw himself to one side and grabbed a small bush.

This strained, pulled half out of the ground, but held. He sat up, heart pounding, and saw that no more than a yard beyond his feet, where beach and vegetation met, was a line of shifting sand. Dancing grains, as if a million tiny animals burrowed from below.

He sat quietly, regaining his breath, but almost jumped out of his shorts as a voice spoke in his ear.

"What's the matter, sonny? Don't you like it here?"

She was an old woman. Incredibly old, Cameron thought as he scanned her deeply lined face. Yet her eyes were bright and she stood erect as a young tree. Her legs were skinny but straight.

She began to laugh. It was a high cackle and brought a flush to Cameron's cheeks. She slapped her hip. She bent double.

"Never saw anything," she gasped, "like you hanging on to that weed."

Cameron rose with what dignity he could muster, brushed himself, and stepped back from the mark which indicated that deadly screen.

"You're Cameron, I suppose," she said. "Well, you're my prisoner." Her wrinkled old face, which looked something like a pair of old civilian shorts, lost its previous amusement. She laid a clawed brown hand on a weapon at her belt. "I mean it," she said. "You're no use to us as long as you're against us, so I won't mind killing you like . . . like that poor little bunny. March up to my shack." She waved toward the forest edge, high on the rim of the hill.

Cameron obediently scanned the hillside. The old lady's tone had an edge to it. She meant what she said. Or so Cameron felt, so strongly that he did not care to gamble his life on the chance of her bluffing. He looked at the hill.

"I don't see any shack."

"To the right of the path, about thirty feet."

He saw it, then, cunningly blended into the trees, and started toward it. She followed briskly, skinny legs which seemed to rattle around in her shorts moving with the energy of youth.

"You can call me Gran," she said, "like the others do. I'm Pier's grandmother, and you probably know about me saving his father when Jorg was killed."

Cameron blinked. The revolution had occurred more than a hundred years ago.

"You can't be," he said. "You'd be a hundred and . . . what. . . . thirty, fifty . . . years old."

"Hundred and forty," she said crisply. "But don't get any ideas about escaping again. Don't let these white hairs—what's left of 'em

—mislead you. I'm plenty spry, and I've seen all the tricks. Used 'em, too. So behave. I won't fool with you."

Cameron believed her. He walked carefully along the path to the door of her "shack." This was of unglazed plastic, rising to a transparent dome level with treetops. He waited while she blew a two-tone whistle behind him and the electrosonic door slid upward, and obeyed her command to step inside.

A gray squirrel chattered angrily at him from a swinging perch and a fat white cat, curled on a cushion in the far corner, opened one green eye for a second's scrutiny.

"Oh, shut up!" Gran Duvain said with fierce tenderness to the squirrel. "Into the elevator, Cameron. Face the wall."

Cameron followed instructions. She entered behind him, closed the door, and they rose to the observation and control room of this sentry shack.

"Sit there in the corner," she commanded. Cameron sank into the chair, watched her touch various buttons on the panel below the seaside window. "Now," she went on, "the screen is between me and you. As long as you sit still you won't be hurt. But don't get out of the chair. Wait a minute though. Might as well make it visible."

She twisted a dial, touched a glowing stud here and there, and a transparent green curtain formed before Cameron. It hung unsuspended, not quite touching ceiling, walls, or floor, but completely hemming him in. Cameron's short hairs stiffened and a little chill touched the back of his neck. He did not intend to move.

"I think you know what will happen," the old lady said pleasantly, "if you try to jump through that screen. I want you to sit still and listen. Pier and Harvey vex me now and then. Turning you loose, indeed! They can't imagine anybody wanting to get away from here. They don't understand your conditioning. They didn't think you'd make a run for a projection."

"Projection?"

She waved a withered hand out the window. "Look!"

Cameron saw the pier, the sleek, shining boats. Her hand moved, touched a stud on the panel. The boats vanished. Cameron caught his breath.

"Did you think we'd actually anchor anything out there?" Gran Duvain demanded. "I played a hunch you'd run for it. Told 'em so. Wish you hadn't flushed that rabbit, though," she added sadly. "One of my favorite pets."

"If I hadn't," Cameron said, "I'd be dead now."

"But I'd still have my pet," she countered. "Well, since you're here, might as well make something of you. Don't interrupt now."

"I'm no child!" Cameron protested.

"Are to me!" she snapped. "At least three times your age. Going to tell you what's happened in the last two hundred years. Make your own choice then. Got any brains you'll throw in with us."

"I've read a lot of history," Cameron said. His tone was resentful. He didn't like a useless old woman pushing him around.

"Read!" she scoffed. "Sonny, I've *made* it. And watched it, too," she conceded. "I wasn't the only one making it. When I snatched Pier's father, Jaques, from a firing squad, though, I started history in motion. You don't know about Jaques. He turned out to be an artist."

That she would admit such a fact about her son shocked Cameron. His expression must have indicated his thought for her mouth became an invisible line among the wrinkles.

"Was a time," she said fiercely, "when artists were honored. Didn't know that, huh? Shut up now! Don't care what your views are on anything. Know who Randolph Williams was?"

Cameron searched his memory. "There was a General Williams—"

"Right! First military dictator of the United States. Wasn't there, myself. Don't know whether it was justified or not. Guess it was, though. Country in a mess after another world war they managed to stir up every twenty-five years or so. Know what he told 'em, though? The people, I mean?"

Cameron blinked through the green veil. "Why, uh—"

"Be still! I'll show you."

She opened a wall closet, took out spools of film and a projector. She fitted one into the other with firm and expert hand, and drew a dimensional screen over the far wall.

The three-dimensional, four-color image was that of a big man with a jaw, in khaki and medals. He thrust the jaw forward, put one brown hand on the gaudy chest display.

"This is a Democracy," he asserted. "Always has been, always will be. Martial law, which I declare here and now, is necessitated by an emergency. You will hear charges of dictatorship flung at me. I will be called Randolph the First. These charges will be silenced, their makers imprisoned if necessary. I give you my solemn promise as an officer and a gentleman that as soon as the present emergency has dissipated, the same government will be restored that has guided this nation in her glorious past. I—"

Gran Duvain stopped the projector, blanked the screen.

"Rest of it's the same bunk," she said. "Know what General Graham said? He was the next, after Williams drunk himself to death one night—or was poisoned."

"Well—" Cameron began.

"Same thing," she interrupted. "And so on down to Jorg. He wasn't dictator when I married him, but he was headed there. And you know what? He believed all those others. He thought they meant what they said. And when he stepped in he started to restore the Democracy, started to return the power of government to the people where it belonged. Well, you know what happened to him. The Four Companies got him."

Cameron frowned but said nothing. Her story did not coincide with history as he had learned it, but he was silent. There was something about her that commanded attention.

"You don't know about them either," she went on. "They began to grow shortly after the first dictatorship and developed into the Centers, excepting Luxury. The big power companies merged into one and formed Power Center, from Canada to Mexico on the east side of the Mississippi. Textile took the east coast, Plastic west of the Mississippi, south of the Lakes. The farm combines took the rest, except a little spot on the West coast where they shipped all the artists."

"May I ask a question?" Cameron asked.

"Sure, sure. Maybe you got sense, after all, showing an interest. What is it?"

"You say the Four Companies got your husband. Wasn't the military in power then?"

"Then? Never has been. Isn't now. Who do you think runs the Centers?"

"Why, the courts and—"

"Tosh! Listen, sonny. Let's see, you're from Plastic. Martin Grueter and the other mill owners *are* Plastic Center."

"But they're only executives."

"Only? Listen. Right after Randolph Williams went in, wasn't long before the Supreme Court died off or was retired and General This and Colonel That replaced 'em. Same all over the country. The army took over the judiciary and administrative functions of government. Who do you suppose ordered it?"

"General Williams, I suppose."

"And who put him in the saddle? The Big Four. Now wait," she cautioned as Cameron opened his mouth. "I don't say the emergency didn't justify it. From all reports the country was in the worst mess in history. But the emergency passed, three hundred years or so later. But by that time there were only two classes, and the executives didn't want the government restored to the people. So they knocked off Jorg and split up into independent Centers. Not so independent, at that. Each has something the others need, so they got an armed truce. You got anything to say to all this?"

"Emergencies don't just pass," Cameron observed.

"You know what I mean," Gran said impatiently. "The country settled down, there wasn't any war. But the people had got used to being ordered around. First thing you knew they figured that was the way things ought to be. They accepted a rotten condition as natural. Thought they still had Democracy because they could elect a Congress that did nothing but criticize. Congress don't have any more to say about conditions than I have. Not as much, because I'm going to change 'em."

Cameron sat thinking of what she had told him, searching for a way to use her and the outlaws to his own advantage. She was quiet, also, looking at the sea and the rising fog through which could now be seen far peaks on the mainland.

Somewhere inside the shack a tone sounded. Gran Duvain peered toward the path which led back to the outlaw capital, vented a short grunt and went to the elevator door.

"Company," she said. Then, with a look of diabolical amusement, "Guess you'll stay put. Yup," she chuckled, "you'll be there when I get back."

"Don't fall and break a leg," Cameron said with mock alarm. "I'd starve."

"You can always walk into the screen," she said lightly, and shot the elevator down.

One burning thought was in Cameron's mind: by one means or another, he must get back to Plastic Center and spread the warning. Pretending to join with the outlaws was not enough, for he would be merely another member of the band. He must offer some plan whereby the opportunity he sought would arise.

If he could take Pier Duvain captive— He smiled almost rapturously at the thought. He could name his price for the most wanted man in the nation. If he could also get hold of the mechanism which formed this death screen—

He made a careful scrutiny of the laboratory. He tried to remember what Gran Duvain had done when she made the screen. Her wrinkled old hands had moved among the maze of studs, dials, and buttons, but there were so many. That little plastic box atop the panel shelf looked sinister and efficient, but surely it could not generate enough power. You could hide it pretty effectively under a jacket.

The weapon was portable in some degree, he knew, for Pier's plane had one installed. Therein lay its greatest danger to civilization.

Cameron shuddered when he pictured the terrible destruction the outlaws could loose upon the Centers. Not only by the killing at will of any number they chose, but destruction of the entire cultural structure. By throwing this screen around each Center, they had only to sit back and name their terms. The Centers must capitulate eventually, or die, for they were not self-sufficient. Each needed some product of the others in order to maintain life.

There lay the weakest point of defense against such a weapon as this, Cameron reflected. All Centers were dependent upon Food Center, of course. But without commodities from Power, Plastic and Textile, Food could not operate efficiently enough even to feed its own citizens.

Yet, the outlaws seemed independent of any. Their buildings were not from Plastic, their roads not from Textile—and he didn't know about their food, though he hoped to soon. He was beginning to be hungry.

Did they manufacture their own necessities? This control room seemed to indicate it, for each article differed in varying degrees from its counterpart in civilized America.

It occurred to him with a slight shock that the outlaws were dependent, after all, to some extent upon Plastic Center. They had raided Plastic freight planes for years, taking their cargoes of Baltex. Why? Perhaps that was an attack point upon them.

He shook his head in exasperation. So much to know before he could form any plan of action.

The elevator's muted hum brought his attention back to his present circumstance. What was he going to tell Gran when she stepped back into this room? He felt certain that he must come to a decision —or appear to. Whatever he decided, he must sound sincere. The old lady was shrewd.

It wasn't Gran who stepped out of the elevator. The legs which extended from a flared tunic of executive purple were one of Nature's greatest artistic achievements.

Executive purple? Rescue? Cameron raised his eyes to the face and gasped as amused eyes, a slightly darker purple than the uniform, twinkled at him.

"You can't slug me this time," Ann Willis said. "Hello, Josh."

"Then you really are the spy," Cameron said. "Somehow, I didn't quite believe it till now. I'm sorry, incidentally, for hitting you."

She shrugged compact shoulders. "I didn't expect it. I should have. It was your only out. But I couldn't play any other role. I had to pretend until I was sure you were safe."

"Why didn't you just turn me in? Or, I mean, why wouldn't you? I would have in your place."

"Two reasons," she said as she sank into Gran's chair and lit a cigarette. "Somebody might listen to your story, even after you were arrested, because of what you'd been. Secondly, we were friends. I don't betray friends."

"How about Grueter, and all the citizens in Plastic?" Cameron's question was not quite a sneer but it cut.

She gave him an amused glance through the green veil. "I'm not betraying them. I'm solidly with Pier on the question of conquest without violence. That's why I'm here by the way. When you disappeared, Grueter started rooting around. You said you'd been discharged on false evidence, and when he examined the evidence he ran across your statement that it wasn't you who informed the outlaws. He's busy now examining those who knew of the shipment. It won't be long before he discovers it was I. So I lit out. We've got to act quickly."

Cameron considered this. *He* must act quickly then. But he needed information. A plan was full formed in his mind, provided that certain conditions obtained.

"Ann," he said casually, "this screen isn't necessary."

She frowned doubtfully. "Gran said to keep it there till she got back. That may be hours, though. The High Council is going to decide on a plan of action and put it to a vote among the membership. That will take time."

"I won't try to escape," Cameron said easily. "I don't want to now."

She narrowed her eyes. She looked at him for several seconds. "Do you mean that?"

"Honestly."

"I believe you," she said. She went to the little box, touched a button and twisted a dial. The screen vanished.

In the process of adjustment she moved the box an inch or so, and Cameron's spirits surged. It was portable. It was small enough to steal.

He and the girl smiled at each other when she was seated again. Cameron was full of confidence. He saw the way clear.

"Gran gave me the true facts of history while she had me caged in here," he said. "It changed many of my views. But I'm not clear on a few points. You came along before she could answer my questions. Where do the outlaws get their power?"

"We make it, the same as Power Center. Gran stole the formula when she lit out with her son. We pirate a shipment of Baltex now and then and convert it into energy for our various camps."

"I see," Cameron said. "That clarifies several things. One more question. Do you manufacture your own products?"

Ann Willis' face glowed. "Gran did that, too. She figured out efficient manufacturing units. They had to be portable because the camps are nomadic. They're really wonderful. Our roads are easier on your feet than Textile's best. Our plastic is lighter and stronger than the Center's most expensive."

"Gran seems to be quite a gal."

"She made this contrascreen, too," Ann said, indicating the little box. "Don't ask me how. It taps our power beam and reorganizes the atomic structure of a tiny bit of Baltex. Then it projects a screen of energy which will destroy almost anything that touches it."

Cameron was ready. His questions were answered.

"Your council wants a sure plan of conquest, without violence?"

"Do you have an idea?" she asked eagerly.

"Listen," Cameron said.

He talked for nearly an hour, outlining each step in detail. She listened tensely, and gradually her face began to glow. When he had finished she was beaming.

"Josh! It's foolproof. Hurry! We must tell them!"

"This is it, Cameron thought. This is the test. If they only believe me I'll be back in uniform within twelve hours.

She ran ahead into the elevator. As her back turned to him, Cameron scooped up the contrascreen box, slipped it under his shirt. He bulged a little, but he thought that they would be so busy with other things that it would escape notice.

They went almost at a run through the forest to the council chamber.

When they had explained artificial crop culture to him, Cameron stood at his place on the rim of the council table and swept the dozen men and women with earnest dark eyes. He willed himself to think as an outlaw, to believe what he said while he said it. They wouldn't believe him if he didn't believe himself, and he had to convince them before he could achieve his ends.

"Your entire theory," he said, "is based on the proposition that a person accepts without question what he has learned to live by. All I have ever known is the culture of the Centers, and I have accepted it. But you, you say, see it objectively and find certain unacceptable factors. All right, I'll grant that for the time being."

He paused for what he felt was the right amount of time to gain their undivided attention.

"But I can look at your own situation equally objectively, and I find a certain blind idealism which cannot see weapons already at hand. Your problem of bloodless conquest is simple to me. The battle is economic in nature."

They stirred restlessly at this, but Cameron held up a hand. "Sure, you know that. You've just told me. But let me go through the project all the way to the end. That's been your trouble. You've run up against a wall before you reached the end. You've heard the first part of this a hundred times, but let me say it once more. All right?"

Gran, at the chairman's seat, nodded shortly.

Cameron boiled it down as much as he could. He merely stated that the first step was to break down the centralization of the culture. He did not go into detail, for they had explained the procedure to him shortly after he and Ann burst into the meeting.

He reviewed the details in his mind, however, as he mentioned it, and felt once more that they advocated sound logic. If Plastic Center had a power unit and manufacturing units plus the outlaws' secret of artificial crop culture, it would be completely self-supporting and independent of the other Centers.

Each Center could be divorced from the others and could be attacked one at a time and conquered by the outlaw contrascreen. That was the simplest solution. But, Cameron reflected, thousands, perhaps millions, would die, and the outlaws did not want that.

"Very well," he said. "It's simple to break down the general culture and form subsidiary cultures. These will probably become armed camps, each bent on conquest of the remainder. That is, of course, if we stopped there. You have stopped there until now."

"Where else can we go?" Gran demanded. "How can we take over the governments and establish a system in which each citizen has an equal voice—without killing?"

"That," Cameron said—with a trace of smugness to make it natural—"is where you've overlooked your most obvious ally. Before I go into that, though, I'd like to ask something. You have your own power units, but you need Baltex? Right? You can't manufacture power otherwise?"

"Right."

"Then the first step in any negotiations must be a trade with Martin Grueter. The process of Baltex for power and manufacturing units. We must begin with Plastic Center before we can offer Textile and Food independence from Power Center. Right?"

"We know all that," Gran said impatiently.

"But you hadn't mentioned your need for Baltex," Cameron said. "I thought I'd get it clear in my own head. Now. We have the Centers operating independently, say. Our problem is to overthrow the dictatorships and substitute a democracy—without violence. Not without force, but without violence. Right?"

"Right!" Gran snapped. "Heaven's sake, sonny, quit stallin'."

"Have you ever considered the councils?" Cameron asked softly.

Blank silence. Brows furrowed, but nobody said anything.

"I can see you haven't," Cameron went on. "You've called them useless. You've said the dictators allowed them and the useless congress to remain so that the people would believe they had a democracy. They've been weapons of the dictators to keep down rebellion. They've been allowed to do nothing but criticize. But remember that power of criticism is powerful. Look what happened to me," he said with a rueful smile.

They still didn't see it, and Cameron felt an honest glow of accomplishment on his face. The hell of it is, he reflected, it'll work. I'd better keep the whip hand.

"What happens," he asked, "when the council lodges a criticism against the head of the military? I'll admit that's a rare event, but it has happened and can happen again. You know what happens. He is demoted to the status of ordinary citizen, and his subordinate succeeds. Now listen."

They did. They were barely breathing.

"Somewhere along the line of officers we can get to one. Convert him if possible, otherwise bribe him. His men will obey without question. On The Day, he will imprison all executives who are not with us and we shall move in. We shall begin an immediate program of education—by example. All citizens shall be declared equal. Since the majority are inferiors of a minority, we'll have the mass support immediately. We'll have Luxury Center broadcast plays demonstrating the beauties of pure Democracy as compared to the present system. We'll make speeches. We'll hold elections. We'll establish a merit system of promotion."

"What happens," Pier Duvain asked, his dark face still skeptical, "if we have objections?"

Cameron pounced on this. He'd overlooked the point but the pressure of his arm against the little box suggested the obvious answer.

"Our first step, after taking over the government, is to demonstrate the contrascreen. After that there won't be any objections that can't be mediated. Now don't tell me that this is government by force, because it need not be. No government, however powerful, will ever need to use force if it administrates for the greatest good of the greatest number. I understand that's our slogan."

"Shut up, all of you!" Gran snapped. "Of course he's right. Thought maybe he had some brains. We never thought of using the councils. All we got to do now is figure a way to make the criticisms stick. Got any suggestions, sonny?"

"That's simple," Cameron said. "Ann is your executive in Plastic. She can ask that certain criticisms be lodged."

"On what grounds?" Ann asked. "We didn't cover that."

"Let's see," Cameron pondered.

"I've got it!" Ann interrupted. "Look. We give the secret of Baltex to Textile Center, and accuse the commanding general of allowing it to be stolen. Inefficiency. Then, if we don't own his successor, we frame him in the same way. It's a temporary humiliation, and it's cheating, but they'll be restored to a political status equal to everyone else, so it won't matter."

"That just about wraps it up," Cameron said. "Now I—"

"Wait a minute," Pier Duvain put in. "I'll admit this sounds all right as far as we go. But what about the other Centers? We can't frame the military there in the same way."

"Don't have to, Pier," Gran said. "Didn't he say Luxury would broadcast plays? When those conditions are actually in force in Plastic, and other Centers can see on-the-spot proof of it, what do you think the citizens will do? What would you do? You'd hightail it over to Plastic first time you could sneak through your Center's Shield. So they'll be forced to let us in, or become depopulated."

So, Cameron thought, the artist is functional after all. What a laugh!

"Well?" Gran said. "Are we with him?"

Their vote was hearty and unanimous. Not a single skeptical face remained in the circle. These faces were alight. They saw the end of a system they had fled, and the beginning of one they had conceived. Where no man should call another master, where all men ranked equally on the sociological scale. This was the end of their dream, the beginning of their task.

Cameron's emotions were somewhat mixed. Not that he had any intention of aiding in the overthrow of civilization as he knew it, but his ruse was so logical, so clear, and had so many qualities that were desirable that he was shaken to a certain degree. Not his faith. That was not shaken. But his belief was not as clear, as strong, as logical.

These outlaws were merely men and women who considered others as well as themselves. They were not brutal, they did not eat their young, they were not illiterate savages. These things he had been taught, had believed. These things were false. He did not ask himself if other "facts" as he knew them were also false. He did not want to ask himself that.

"May I make another suggestion?" he asked.

"Sonny," Gran chuckled. "You can do any darn thing you're a mind to."

"I think it would be sound psychology if I went to Grueter and offered him a power unit. I'd say I've been captured by outlaws and got away. I was chief of police, you know. If I turn up with a surefire formula for Plastic Center independence I'd probably get my job back and be doubly valuable."

"There's sense to that," Gran said. "What do you want, a plane?"

"No-o. I thought somebody could take me in. Pier, maybe."

They thought this over. Cameron cursed himself silently. He must not, must not make them suspicious.

"You see," he said glibly, "I'm not a pilot."

Their faces relaxed. "Surely," Pier Duvain said. "I'll take you."

"Under these conditions," Ann said, "I'll go back. There won't be any more spy hunt. And I'm necessary."

Cameron dared not object. He didn't want Ann in this for reasons not quite clear to him. He didn't know why; he only knew that he didn't want her involved. But he said nothing.

"I think I'll go, too," Harvey Willis said. "I'd like to watch the fireworks."

"I'll just go along, too, for the ride," Gran said. "Well, let's get a vote on this proposition." She spoke to a young man with a high forehead. "Shoot it to all the camps. Insist on an immediate vote. Let us know."

Cameron's jaw dropped. "You mean we may not go through with it?"

"Not if the people don't like it," Gran said. "What do you think a democracy is, anyway?"

Inside the long black plane, Cameron took a secluded chair aft on the excuse that he wanted to study the proposition to Grueter. Shielded by the seat in front, he examined the contrascreen box.

It's face was covered with clear directions and a large warning: HANDLE WITH CARE! He found the formula he wanted—how to form a dome one hundred yards in diameter and fifty feet high. The plane would fit comfortably inside that. He set the control dial at points indicated by the formula and slipped the box back into his shirt.

They were high in the dark night above the channel between the island and mainland, and Cameron could see nothing through the observation ports but stars and far lights on the shore which probably indicated Luxury Center.

He was thankful that the vote had taken so little time, for Gran had not returned to her sentry shack after unanimous agreement of outlaw camps had been announced. Of course, she might have overlooked the absence of the box, but, on the other hand—

He strained eager eyes as the plane fled silently through the night. Plastic Prime was yet three hours away, and these began to drag. Some inner compulsion prevented his fraternizing with the outlaws, some uneasiness. He did not attempt to define this. When he became too uncomfortable, he caught Ann's eye and was made all the more uneasy, but pleasantly so, by the warmth that flooded him.

When the klystron announced Plastic's Shield ahead, Ann called out the collapse combination to Pier, and they were inside.

Now it begins, Cameron thought, and paced the floor in an anxiety which brought sweat to every inch of his body. It couldn't go wrong, of course. His plan was certain to succeed. Nevertheless, he heaved a great sigh when Pier dropped into a wide, deserted field at the edge of Plastic Prime.

Two tasks remained now inside the plane. To get through the good-byes without incident, and to convince Ann that she should remain aboard. If she insisted on accompanying him he'd have to slug her again. He didn't want to do that. He was not even sure he could force himself to it.

She was tractable, however.

"You'd better let me find out if you're suspect," he said. "Then I'll let you know."

Her eyes deepened in color as she shook hands. "Thanks for the thought, Josh. I'll wait—for you."

"Good luck," they wished him, and he was off.

He paced one hundred fifty yards, turned, pressed the activisor on the box and set it under a small bush out of sight. A tiny streak of flame circled around the plane as grass tops perished under the contra-screen.

Cameron hailed the plane and Pier Duvain answered.

"I've set a screen around you," Cameron said. "The dome. You'll be here when I get back, I think."

Pier came silently toward Cameron, a slim silhouette in the dark. He stopped ten yards away.

"What now, Cameron?"

"I'm going to turn you over to the authorities, Pier."

Duvain said nothing. The silence became painful.

"Did you think I'd stand by and see you destroy what we live by?" Cameron demanded. "This is my world you want to overturn. I can't let you do that."

Duvain said nothing.

"Naturally," Cameron said, "I feel bad about it on personal grounds. I like you and I think you're honest. But you're wrong, Pier. So I have no alternative."

The others had joined Pier. They said nothing.

"I'm sorry," Cameron said uncomfortably. "I'll make it as easy on you as possible. But you see, don't you, that I had no choice? It was no fault of mine that I was removed from a position in which I had a great deal of pride. Self-preservation, if nothing else, was a strong enough motive for my action. But in addition I was fighting for my world. My fight is as honest as yours, and has the added weight of majority approval."

Nobody answered him.

"You make me feel like a first-class son of an actor," Cameron said. "Pardon the profanity. But I'm acting according to my lights. No man can do more."

When the silence became unbearable, Cameron wheeled and marched away. Martin Grueter's home was not far, but it was too far for Cameron, for he didn't like the figures who accompanied him.

These were four, close packed in the dark, immobile, silent. Ann, Duvain, Harvey and Gran. They were with him, almost realities. Everywhere he looked he saw them, motionless, silently accusing him of treachery.

Ann. She didn't betray friends. She proved it. He had been dangerous to the world she wanted, but she hadn't turned him in. She'd pretended to be unconscious, so that he could take her coagulator and a makeshift star. Friends.

Stop it! he commanded himself silently. You'll be turning back, first thing you know. You'll be an outlaw, equal under their code with all men. Their system would work, too, he reflected, but look what it would do to things as they are. Even an artist would have a vote in civic affairs.

He hurried, pushing these thoughts away, and presently stood on Grueter's identification plate. The door slid up, and Cameron entered.

Martin Grueter, big, square-faced, stood in the doorway to his bedroom and leveled a coagulator at Cameron.

"I am happy to see you," he said in level, sneering tones. "May I be of service?"

This, more than anything that happened later, shocked Cameron. During the few hours he spent with the outlaws, he had forgotten the formalities of the Centers. Suddenly he found them empty.

"I have Pier Duvain," he said abruptly. "He is my prisoner."

"Is that so important that you can dispense with ordinary politeness?" Grueter asked. "Where is he?"

"Not so fast," Cameron cautioned. "I want to make a trade."

"Where is he?"

"I want my job back," Cameron said, "and a few more things. Then I'll tell you where he is."

"Where—is—he?"

"Do you mean that you won't trade?"

For answer Grueter pressed a button on the wall beside him. Cameron became coldly angry.

"Calling in soldiers won't make me tell. For Heaven's sake, Martin, I'm doing this nation a great service. Surely you'll discuss it with me."

"Why should I dicker with you?" Grueter said shortly. "Give you back your job? You're not a desirable citizen. You're not even a desirable ordinary civilian. You refused to accept a judgment passed by your superiors. We don't want men like you in this nation."

"Then you'll never take Duvain."

"If he's inside Plastic Center, and he must be if he's a prisoner, we'll find him."

"Yes, you'll find him," Cameron said. "You can practically see him from here. Look!"

He pointed through the still-open door. The outlaw plane was barely visible as a blacker outline against the night.

"He's on there, captive."

Grueter's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You're telling the truth!" he exclaimed, almost in a whisper.

"On both counts, Martin."

A plane swooped down at the door and two soldiers in red saluted Grueter. Cameron smiled wryly at Captain Robert Fane.

Fane went through an obsequious ritual of greeting which Grueter absently acknowledged. His eyes were on the plane.

"Guard this man. When I return you can dispose of him."

"Don't go out there!" Cameron said as Grueter moved toward the door. "Martin, it's death for you."

Grueter went out into the night.

Cameron turned to Captain Fane. "Stop him, captain! He's going to his death."

Captain Fane's heavy, swart features showed amused indifference. He said nothing, but it was clear that he didn't care one way or the other about Martin Grueter.

Cameron shrugged. "I tried. You were witnesses."

He was not yet aware of what had happened within himself. But when the soldiers turned bored eyes to the doorway through which Grueter had vanished, Cameron had an opportunity to analyze his feelings.

He was an outlaw.

This was shocking, but there was pleasure in it. As the outlaws themselves walked with pride, he now felt equal with these soldiers who ranked next only to executives on the Center's social scale. He was an outlaw, as good as any man.

He had refused Martin Grueter's command, had thrown custom and caste aside, had rebelled in that one act against the culture in which he had been born and raised. At the moment of rebellion he had felt motivated by a desire to attain his former eminence. But he realized now that his motive had been deeper, embedded in a sense of independence which had grown to maturity among the outlaws.

The very scheme, he now realized, which he had proposed as a strategic maneuver against Duvain, had sprung from some basic part of his nature. He believed it. He had believed when he trapped the outlaws, but long conditioning prevented him from admitting it.

Yes, he was an outlaw now in spirit but not in fact. He was a captive. Further, and more serious, more heartbreaking, he was undoubtedly an outcast. After what he had done to Duvain and Gran, and Willis and Ann, they could have only contempt for him.

Ann. How would she look at him now? Not with deep lights in her purple eyes. On that occasion in Grueter's office, later in her own, her eyes had been hard, glazed. He shivered, remembering their coldness. And she had been acting then. How would she look now when she meant it?

He twisted an ironic smile when he realized that he'd probably never know. Eventually, somebody would find that plastic box and turn off the screen. The outlaws would be helpless before the wave of attackers that would roll over them. And before that, perhaps, Josh Cameron himself would be a corpse.

At least he had a momentary satisfaction knowing that he was no longer subject to empty codes which made a great mass slaves of a few in purple. He had his moment, an independence denied most.

At that moment a faint call came through the door.

"Soldiers! Help!"

Captain Fane sighed. "Come on," he said to Cameron. "Don't try anything fancy."

Cameron marched between them across the field, dormant hope stirring faintly within him. Any informal action could create opportunity, and this, God knew, was informal.

The outlaw ship loomed larger as they approached, and Cameron could see the group silhouette of those four he was ashamed, but ached with desire, to face. Fifteen yards nearer stood Martin Grueter, who urged them with almost incoherent gibberish.

"Get 'em," he cried. "Give me your coagulator. Shoot the rats. Pier Duvain's there, the coward. Come on out, you. I'll show you!"

His voice was almost hysterical and contained a note which Cameron could not place. Fear? Anger? Insanity?

Grueter lunged toward them in the darkness and snatched the soldier's weapon from his belt. The big man whirled, pointed and pressed the activator. With what seemed to be maniacal fury, he flung the weapon at the group of silent outlaws. A small flash, a hushed *pop!*

"A fine soldier!" Grueter snarled. "Useless weapon! Give me yours, captain."

"What's the difficulty, sir?" Fane inquired, taking his coagulator from its holster.

"Idiocy. Contrascreen, indeed! No such thing. Give—me—that—"

Fane presented the coagulator, butt first. Grueter snatched it, aimed, fired, and hurled it from him. He spoke with shaking, but controlled fury.

"Both of you men will be reduced to ordinary citizens for incompetency. Suppose you had to *use* those weapons. Capture those four!"

The soldiers started forward. Cameron took each by an arm. "Wait a second." They halted, surprised. "Why don't you go in there, Martin?"

The soldiers gasped at both the familiarity and at the sneer in Cameron's voice.

"They stopped me, begged me," Grueter said. "Told me I would die. Nonsense! Attend to you later." To the soldiers: "Well?"

Cameron's hold tightened as the men surged forward. He yanked first one, then the other, to a stop. They faced him.

"Don't try it," Cameron said. "Let him go if he wants to. They saved his life, but I won't stop him if he isn't afraid. There's no need for you to die, though. You haven't done anything."

Captain Fane and his aid said nothing. Cameron could feel their uneasiness.

"Make Grueter do it," he pressed. "He's the one who wants 'em. Let him go in after 'em."

"Are you going to obey?" Grueter snapped. "Or would you rather be executed?"

They flinched, as if struck by a whip, and jerked free.

Cameron swung at Fane's jaw and the soldier's knees buckled. Without waiting to see the result of his blow, Cameron dived at the other soldier's legs, threw him sprawling.

Cameron's world spun as Grueter kicked him behind one ear. His arms went limp, but he rolled clear of the next kick and struggled to his feet. The soldier was up, too, and Cameron kicked him in the stomach. The man bent double as Captain Fane hit Cameron high on the head.

He hit the ground and bounced. He was groggy but able to rise. In a stumbling rush he leaped after Fane, dragged him down. When Grueter kicked him again, Cameron rolled to a point where he heard a faint crackle. Immediately, cries reached him.

"Josh! Be careful!"

"That was close, Cameron."

"Let 'em come, sonny. It'll teach 'em a lesson."

Cameron jumped away from the crackling. Maybe the contra-screen did sound like that where it met the earth. He didn't want to make sure. He jerked Fane clear, kicked him in the jaw with every last atom of strength and fell as the other soldier sped past him, intent on carrying out his master's order.

The flash, the explosion, brought silence.

"That's one down," Gran said, after a few seconds. "He'll know better after this."

Martin Grueter said softly, "What a weapon! A man could rule—"

His tone was shrill with fear, but his words were suddenly crisp. "What do you want for it, Cameron?"

"Shut up!" Cameron said contemptuously. "Haven't you any feeling?"

He helped Captain Fane to his feet. "Sorry about your buddy, captain. I tried."

Fane gripped Cameron's hand, spoke under his breath. "You can ask me anything . . . anything. I'll do it, I don't care why."

"I'll remember that, captain."

"Well?" Grueter broke in. "You came here to make a trade. All right, I'll agree. But I'm not as interested in Duvain as I am in this screen. It may have a certain small value, and I am willing to discuss terms."

"Be quiet!" Cameron snarled. "I want to think."

"Do you realize who I am?" Grueter blustered.

"Yes," Cameron said wearily. "I didn't until now." He tried to discern the mottled look which he knew was flooding Grueter's square face. "So shut up."

Grueter gasped and Captain Fane shifted uneasily. But Cameron got his moment of quiet.

Presently he went to the little bush, picked up the plastic box and snapped the switch. He came back to Grueter.

"I'll dicker with you, Martin."

"Good!" Grueter enthused. "I like a man who makes quick decisions. We'll get along, Josh, old fellow."

"Get into that plane," Cameron said.

"Into—"

"The plane. Quick!"

"But—the screen."

"This is the screen. One false move and I turn it on you. You're safe, as long as you obey." He turned to Captain Fane. "Go back to your office, captain."

Fane saluted. "Yes, sir."

With Grueter walking cautiously, fearfully ahead, Cameron went toward the plane. When he reached the outlaws, he gave the box to Gran, whispered to Ann:

"You're a prisoner, too. March in there with him."

She obeyed without question.

"Miss Willis has already agreed to my proposal," Cameron said later when they were high in the darkness. "We captured her yesterday, but she finally agreed. She has the interests of Plastic Center at heart, it seems."

Ann took her cue. Her dark eyes were anxious. She twisted her long white hands as she hung on Grueter's reply.

"Independence," he mused. "It's desirable, but frankly, old man, I'd rather talk about that amazing weapon."

He turned avaricious eyes on it and Gran glared at him.

"You can't have it," Cameron said.

Grueter shrugged. "Ah, well. All right, I'll give you the Baltex formula for . . . let's see, what were they . . . power and manufacturing units. Yes," he mused, "we can soon bring the other Centers to terms." He twinkled jovially. "I don't suppose you jolly outlaws care about that?"

Pier Duvain set the robot controls and joined the group. He gave Grueter a dark, level stare, and said:

"You're not fooling us, Grueter. We know you'll set all the forces you command after us as soon as we drop you. You'll give us a phony formula and hope to catch us before we have a chance to try it. So we're keeping Miss Willis as hostage."

Cameron forced down the singing that rose within him. Not to well, for Gran shot him an amused look.

"Oh, I say!" Grueter protested. "She's one of the most valuable members of my staff."

"And," Pier Duvain went on, "we're throwing our contrascreen around Plastic Prime until we've had time to prove your formula bona fide."

"But that will maroon us, man! It will stop all traffic. We have contracts to fill."

"That's your problem."

Grueter was thoughtfully silent. Finally, "What else can I say?" he asked. "I'm forced to agree."

"Oh, no," Duvain contradicted. "You can refuse. We're not going to kill you. We'll deliver you safely and take our proposition to Power Center."

"Oh, my God, man! They'd soon rule the nation! They have enough Baltex ahead to last a year. No, I'll agree, all right."

They returned him, secured the formula and his promise to stop all traffic to and from Plastic Prime, and were soon headed for their island.

Cameron cut short the impromptu celebration. "Before I go into a personal matter here is something you don't know. Fane is grateful enough to lodge a criticism against Grueter for allowing the Baltex formula to get out of his hands. We can provide Fane with proof. Then Ann can take care of Fane's superiors until he's in command. Then we can move in. It shouldn't take long. Now, what are you going to do with me?"

His tone brought stares.

"When I went into Grueter's, I tried to sell you out."

A hardness came into their eyes. They had forgotten, in their triumph. He looked at them in turn. Pier's eyes were steady, not cold, not warm; Harvey's, red-rimmed, were aloof; Gran's were blank; Ann's wide with—what? Sadness, anxiety?

Gran broke the silence. "What caused you to change?"

Cameron told them. "I believed, I suppose, all along," he added, "but wouldn't admit it. Anyway, there it is. I tried to betray you. Whatever you decide, I've got it coming, I guess."

"I suggest," Duvain said, "that we put you on probation for a suitable time, that we don't give you any authority until you've proved your sincerity. After all, even your about-face at Grueter's might be temporary, induced by anger and a desire to lash out at something which threatened you personally."

"He risked his life," Ann pointed out, "to save those soldiers. And almost lost it. That looks sincere."

"I agree with Pier," Gran said. "He ought to be watched. We'd better put a guard over him."

"Absolutely," Harvey Willis agreed. "We can't take a chance on his getting away."

Cameron felt humble. They were giving him another chance. He smiled at Ann. To the others: "Thank you."

"We'll keep him safe for you, honey," the old woman said to Ann, "till you can take over the job."

Cameron blinked, examined them. They were joking. He looked at Ann. She was suddenly scarlet.

"Should've heard her," Gran said to him. "Took on no end when you'd gone. Said you'd come through all right. Said she'd never—"

"Gran!" Ann cried. "Don't."

"Safe to tell him," Gran went on. "I can read signs. You're the only one for him." She turned to Cameron. "Said she'd never fall for a rat."

A strained but pleasant silence fell. Cameron knew he was looking fatuous. He attempted a grin at Ann. It felt all right, but he imagined that he looked as if he'd just been promoted. Ann didn't seem to mind.

"If your first one's a boy," Gran said slyly, "maybe he'll grow up to be president."

Events in Man's progress had become cosmic in scope. Victories were won in the great interstellar wars of 23,000, the first war of the robots in 42,000 and in the final robot wars of 83,000. For 20,000 years of peace the human species pressed on from galaxy to galaxy. Perhaps, though, the journey to infinity had ended. When the new crisis came it was recognized soon enough, but the spiral downward into darkness seemed inevitable.

BARRIER OF DREAD

by Judith Merril

It would have been a perfect day for the Managing Director, but his wife spoiled it for him. Sarise had a way of saying unexpected things; it was half her charm. This time as they settled into the cushions on the moving ramp that would take them into the space ship from the great amphitheatre where the ceremonies had been held, she looked worried. That is to say, she would have looked worried if it were possible that a mature woman in perfect health of body and mind, with nothing to desire, could have looked worried.

"It's too fast," was all she said, but Dangret had lived with her long enough to know what she meant.

"I can't quite make up my mind whether you're a throwback or just an incurable romantic," he told her in a tone that might have been angry had he understood the nature of anger. But it was as long since humans had had cause to understand anger, as it was since they had known reason for worry. He was, however, not joking. Sarise held a greater fascination for Dangret than any of his earlier wives, because in twenty-five years he had been completely unable to settle this problem to his own satisfaction.

She was unperturbed. "It's too fast," she repeated. "No one man should have the glory of opening two galaxies during his Directorship. It's . . ."

"Certainly this feeling of . . . what did they call it . . . guilt?

. . . in pleasure or glory is more of an atavism than a romantic notion. Sarise, do you seriously mean . . ."

"Yes I do, and it's neither atavism *nor* romanticism," his wife retorted; "it's common sense. I don't know the figures. That's your business. But I know as well as you do that the maximum percentage that choose for exploration is lower than the number you'll be needing if settlement speeds up at the rate it is."

"That takes care of itself," he told her. "You know the children of settlers have the highest inclination for exploration. The system works because these factors *do* level out."

Sarise had made up her mind. "Try it on your calkers," she tossed back, reaching for the portable sensory recorder she always kept near at hand. She began to finger the controls, making a record of her ideas before she lost them. "I'm going to do a composition on it, anyhow." She punched a key vehemently. "And if the images I get out of this set of ideas don't make a real fear sensation, I'll give up composing for good."

"If they do," he laughed, "I'll probably ban it. Nobody's done a successful fear-image in *my* lifetime, and I'm not sure it's a good idea for anyone to do it."

Sarise was no longer interested. The section of the ramp that held their cushions had left the moving carrier and deposited them in their own quarters on the flagship that would take them back to Earth, where, tradition decreed, the Director must live—despite its many inconveniences.

Dangret was thoughtful as he watched his wife become more absorbed in the machine that would eventually produce a combination of sound, light, and emotion as effective as anything else being done in the universe. His eyes wandered over to the far wall of the room where a huge fresco depicted the underlying pulse of their age. It wasn't supposed to be scientific; it showed a suited man—without a helmet—and a lovely woman, without any protection other than the modern trappings she wore, leaping off the rear tubes of a rocket ship, the kind that was outmoded in Dangret's grandfather's times. Flames in space surrounded them, and another ship, apparently burning, could be seen in the background. There was no fear on the faces of the pair. To Dangret and to the artist who had done the work, the fresco symbolized the limitless possibilities of human will, and the endless expansion of human destiny.

He looked back at Sarise; he had originally made up his mind to meet this woman when he heard her first composition, and he had realized when he suggested their union that she might leave him physically, at any time for her work. Dangret was accustomed to it, and, like others of his day, found the spectacle of another being absorbed in creative activity second best only to the sensation of that absorption within his own person.

Now, however, he was not as much concerned with Sarise or her composition as he was with the casual remark that had preceded it. It was no serious problem, of course; it would probably have some use-value as the basis for an effective image, but it could be solved, if the matter became sufficiently acute, by the manufacture of explorer-robots. As a matter of fact, the calkers had tabulated the percentages sometime back, and had automatically begun designing the new type androids. But her "Too fast, too fast," had moved something in him—possibly, he thought, amused at his own reaction, an atavism of his own.

He went to sleep with the thought still on his mind, a nagging little thought that pulled at him and wouldn't let him be. Sarise's explanation was wrong, but there was something. It *was* too fast. Why, why?

In the morning the little nagging concern had not left him, nor did it through the day of welcomes and further ceremonies on Earth. Dangret was a wise man, and two hundred years in his job had taught him much. He knew better than to ignore or suppress the thought; something was wrong, somehow, and he had to find out what it was. *Too fast . . .*

He tried the sensory images. Some of Sarise's compositions, he had found, could clear almost all impressions from his conscious mind and leave the subconscious open for exploration. He had banished this sort of troublesome unresolved thought before. This time, even the images failed. He tried another method, something he had not done for many years now, not since he heard the first Sarise poem.

Human history had a well-defined logic of its own, a logic not entirely within the power of the calkers to compute, but sometimes more directly ascertainable by the natural curves of instinct. When he was younger, and troubled by ideas not clear enough to hand over to calkers for solution, Dangret had had a composition created for himself, one that would allow him, in a few hours, to re-live the path of galactic conquest, empire, bureaucracy, and managership. The piece was designed to sweep broad outlines at the beginning, and narrow down, as it proceeded, till at the end it was done in such detail that it was necessary to add to it yearly to keep it complete.

Now he had the composition brought to his own room, announced that he would be unavailable for the next hours, and settled down in the almost-severe white-painted simplicity of his personal quarters, to review the past, and discover if he could what factor of the present could menace the future.

It was a long while since he had sensed the piece, and now he participated almost physically in its drama. He swept in ridiculously ornate flowing robes beside the first World Emperor, the man who had bound the Earth into a unit with which to conquer space. With the early explorers, he suffered the hardships of unperfected atomics, and landed beside them on the first extra-solar planet. He followed the search for inhabited planets, and felt the strange combination of loneliness and power that had spread over Earth as it became clear that life, as life on Earth was defined, was a galactic freak. Nowhere else had there been a combination of environmental factors that made large and complex life-forms an evolutionary desideratum.

But for the conquering Earthmen, there had to be subjects of conquest—so they manufactured them. Robots tilled the soil on those planets where it was rich, dug wealth from the ground where rock and ore prevailed, built fantastically luxurious palaces for earthmen on the best-suited orbs.

Dangret watched and lived with the triumph of a world as the empire spread over a galaxy, and stopped. He fought, first with the robots, ancestors (if the term can be used) of his calkers, and then with the humans, in the three great revolts. He lived, with other Earthmen, in dread of a mechanistic mastery of life, when it was finally established that the robots had learned the secret of "reproduction," and he was present at the peace treaty, when only the humans' superior will to live and rule won them the slight edge of victory.

He was one with the first Bureaucrats, who established the principle of Dynamic Exchange, and lived with the men who guided each new type of robot, adapted to work on a particular planet, from the initial slave-labor stage, through the long haul to self-sufficient technology and self-manufactory. And he was there when the first calker, the ultimate design of human and robot cooperation, discovered the trick of crossing inter-galactic space.

The calkers killed the Bureaucracy; the bureaucrats' own theories of dynamics, really, killed it, but intergalactic commerce finished it.

The last pressure had been removed; the robots had taken from man all the burdens of unpleasant labor. Earthmen were fed, clothed, housed, and given all their simpler physical pleasures mechanically. The most complicated of the mechanical aides were sent out to prepare new territories for their Earth masters, and when, finally, other galaxies were opened for settlement, there was no need for any human to be put upon in any way by other humans. The enormous strides in medicine, and the lessening of the burden of labor had produced a constantly increasing population, and had the resultant numbers been confined, even in the extent of a single galaxy, there might still have been cause for strife, jealousy, and hate.

But when every man could have his own robot-manned planet if he chose, when all those who wished to govern and dominate could; all those who loved adventure and exploration could have it; all those who wanted nothing but creative or intellectual activity were free to devote themselves to it, *and there was no limit*—the very nature of man changed. Dangret traveled with the first crew members to the second galaxy and sank back into his cushions as he experienced the relief that flooded Earthmen on all the inhabitable planets as endless space opened up to accompany endless service.

He himself today had opened the seventh galaxy; as a boy he had known the eighth Manager, who opened the Fourth Galaxy. The system, by that time, had been established. Calkers designed new machines, new androids, to fit the new conditions of each planet, as soon as the first explorers brought back their reports. Some were to be prepared for human habitation; others would be colonized by robots, and utilized as sources of raw material. Humanity lived and prospered on the slight difference between what the robots produced, and what, in the end, they consumed, and the greater the expansion, the greater the total sum of that slight difference.

But the system was benevolent, for anything apart from benevolence was no longer acceptable to what had been called "human nature." It had become horribly clear, during the robotic revolutions, that the intangibles that change a group of men into a mob could change a collection of robots into a society, with a functioning mind and even emotion-pattern of its own. Men, happy and satisfied men, to whom exploitation was impossible, were faced with choice of giving up their robots or keeping them "happy." With the struggle of those men, Dangret suffered, and with them, he chose the only possible course: robots in social groupings must be given technology and almost-complete independence as fast as they demanded it, if they were to be kept working for humanity.

The system worked; it had worked; there was no reason why it should not continue to work. Dangret relived the plans for the ceremonies of the day before, and came gradually back to the day itself . . . with the nagging thought still pulling at his mind, unresolved.

It went with him as he sought Sarise in her apartment, to find her locked in her room, hard at work, and seeing no one, not even him. And it stayed with him through the next lonely week, aggravated by his enforced separation from his wife. More and more he found himself staring at the fresco on his wall, uneasiness growing in him. He tried all the psychological tricks he knew on himself, did his best to set the problem up for the calkers by tracing his thought patterns; but when, more than a week later, Sarise sent word that she was finished, he went to her quarters delighted at the thought that this troublesome idea might be lost for a time in her company.

He found her pacing the airfoam floors of her room, thin and vibrant. She would never take time to eat when she was working, but always seemed to emerge from these periods with an inner life that disregarded her abused body. She couldn't wait for his words or embrace. Shining with excitement, and almost inarticulate, she pulled him to a spot in the center of the room, best suited for reception, and waiting only for his indulgent nod of assent, began the projection of her new piece.

Sarise's work was always basically musical. A composition, of course, might include, or exclude, any known form of sensory stimulation, and it might utilize a number of forms in fairly equal proportions—but, just as the one he had witnessed a week earlier was essentially photographic, a series of three-dimensional images reinforced by sonics, so this, like all of Sarise's work, commanded all the senses, but rested primarily upon the aesthetics of music.

Dangret kept command of himself long enough to reach over and press the levers that would bring Sarise some food, then he was lost completely in the compelling experience of his wife's newest work. To describe either what he saw, felt, tasted, or heard, or the almost too-vivid sensations that welled up in him would be impossible. Great works of art cannot be discussed; they must be participated in. Dangret participated to the fullest, and experienced an emotion he had never known before.

The musical base of the thing modulated to a theme that seemed to close in around him. Tighter and tighter it pressed, squeezing him, forcing him in on himself, pushing from all sides, with no escape, no escape. Dangret's muscles tensed; his heart labored, then beat too fast, labored, pounded again. His salivary action was insufficient, and his peristaltic action, for the first time in a long life, proved uncontrollable. A little fear will go a long way with a perfectly adjusted man.

As the last note faded away, and daylight began to stream again through the walls, he lay back in a torpor of relief, unconscious of his wife, the room, or anything else but the churning of his own thoughts and emotions. When, finally, he lifted his head, Sarise was calmly devouring the food he had ordered for her. She smiled at him.

"I did it, didn't I?" she demanded. She could never quite get over a childlike wonder and delight at the things that came out of her. Dangret nodded, and got up slowly. The experience had been shocking, and shock—another word that till now had had only a dictionary meaning—was what he had needed. He was at the door before he spoke, and then it was only to say, "Sarise, there is something I have to do right now; will you promise to show that to no one else till I come back?"

The woman stared in amazement, but she was exceptionally sensitive, and recognized this was not a time for argument or discussion. She nodded mutely, and watched him go. It was just as well; she needed food and sleep now more than admiration.

In his office, Dangret began punching furiously at the great bank of communications keys that covered one entire wall. It was a matter of moments till he had connected the Council of Physical Scientists. Men from all over the six civilized galaxies stopped their work, and concentrated on their com units. A convening of the entire council was a rare event. Even rarer were Dangret's opening words.

"Scientists of the world: You know the rights that reside in me as Managing Director. You know that I have utilized those rights no more than my predecessors. There has been no need to direct, but only to manage. Now I invoke my emergency power, for, dependent upon your work, we may soon be faced with a desperate emergency. I shall not attempt to outline the entire matter; that is a problem for the Social Scientists, and when you have finished your part, they shall begin theirs.

"This is secret information. We are on a closed beam, and no man is to repeat these instructions until my formal permission is granted. Now: you are, each of you, to abandon the work you have been doing, and start on . . ."

He made his instructions specific, assigned units and unit directors, answered startled queries for several hours, and, finally, flicked off the last open line on his com set, his mind finally free of the tiny doubt that had plagued it. The problem was in the hands of the scientists, now, where it belonged. Dangret tried the private com to Sarise's room, found her asleep, and went in to wait in the relaxation of her pleasant quarters until she might wake.

They had a rare private supper together late in the evening, both of them relaxed and happy in achievement. Sarise never asked questions; it was another of her endearing traits. But this time when they had finished eating, and Dangret had still said nothing about her composition, eagerness overcame her sense of delicacy.

She sat upright on the cushioned floor where they rested, a tense vivid figure, black hair and rosy lips the more colorful over her white robe. "Dan . . . you haven't said anything," she fumbled a little. She was not accustomed to having to ask for criticism. "My piece . . . ?"

"Yes, your piece." He was thoughtful. "It's the best thing you've ever done, Sarise." His tone was so sober as to make her a little ashamed to have asked. A faint blush of something akin to modesty crept over her face, and drained swiftly away as he went on: "But no one will ever hear it. Sarise, I'm going to exercise a right no Director has used for five hundred years, and ban your composition."

"Buy why? *Why?*" The woman was on her feet, pacing half across the room, and coming back to lean over him with a look of tortured incomprehension. *"Why?"*

He carefully avoided touching her. His hand on hers would have helped, but this was a matter of Director and artist, not man and wife. "Because it's too good. Because you did what you set out to do. Because you created fear. And because there *is something to fear."*

She sank down beside him, defeated. There was no question of unfairness. This was Dangret's answer, and she knew it must be true. "Something to . . . *fear?"*

"Yes." Now he could take her hand. "Listen to me, Sarise. I can't tell you all of it, now, not until the CPS finds the answers for me. But the problem is similar with that you outlined in your composition. The fear-reaction you aroused stems from the concept of compression applied to an organism that *must* expand. You know the dynamics of the directorship are based on expansion—indefinite, unlimited expansion. The compression you outlined . . . well," he rose, abruptly. "That's all I can tell you now, but believe me, no one must hear that."

She rose with him. "It's that serious then?" Her tone was awed. "The dynamics of the directorship . . . ?" Then her thoughts went back to her piece. "Banned . . . forever, Dan? Perhaps in a few years, perhaps when your problem is solved?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps *if* my problem is solved." He left her with that.

Because they were reasonable, adjusted people, both of them put the matter out of their minds after that evening. The problem was in other hands, and when the answer came from the scientists, it would be reopened. It was not that they forgot; rather they compartmented. Dangret checked periodically with the Council on the progress of the research units; Sarise played her piece from time to time and made slight revisions here and there. But, recognizing that final action would have to wait on the findings of the CPS, neither of them allowed his own part of the difficulty to assume emotional proportions.

The answer was a long time coming. When it did, finally, Dangret took the news first to Sarise.

She was walking in the natural garden in front of the official residence, and greeted him with a small sigh.

"I think I'll make a trip to Tangerix III," she told him. "I've been wanting to see the family, and there's something about this poor excuse for vegetation that makes me half wild!" She pointed to the trees and flowers of Earth, none of which could compare in any way with the planned landscapes of robot-constructed homesites on the better planets. Tangerix particularly boasted garden-spot planets.

"Not to soon, I hope." Dangret smiled, teasing a little. "You'd like to be here when your composition is played, wouldn't you?"

She wheeled to face him, breathless. *"When?"* It was a sound more than a word.

"Next week. For the Council of Social Scientists. After that," his words became more sober, "you can go to Tangerix, and I'll go with you."

"But . . . how can you? You have Council sessions coming, and . . ."

"And as of next Tuesday, the Directorship will no longer exist, and your piece will help finish it." She raised a puzzled face to his.

"No, I can't tell you any more, and I shouldn't have said that much. I . . . well, I got my answer; it was what I was *afraid* of, you see, and it leaves me no alternative but . . ." he stopped abruptly. "We'll go to Tangerix. You can make plans now if you like." She followed him into the next room, watched him stand before the fresco. There was an expression on his face that she had never seen before as he summoned a robot and set it to remove the painting.

"I cannot bear to see it any longer."

The conclave of social scientists was held on Earth, at a person-to-person meeting—a rare event—and planned that way for only one reason: so that Sarise's composition could have an effect it could not possibly achieve over the other. The Council met early in the morning, and Dangret, in a few words, informed them that they had been assembled for a purpose. But before he told them that purpose, he wished to have them review two sensories, and to contain their curiosity until after the playings.

There was some murmuring of impatience from younger men who could not understand being called away from important work for entertainment, but the older heads, who had worked under Dangret for many years, leaned back in their cushions, and lost themselves in their senses as the first piece started, the historical review Dangret himself had seen many months before.

The younger members had not experienced it before, and the majestic sweep of the epic soon stilled the few murmurs. By the time it was finished, and Sarise's indescribable composition began to fill their senses, they were all completely receptive. When it was over, absolute silence filled the great Council Hall. Dangret himself was almost as much affected on second hearing as the others were on first reception. He let the hush prevail for a full minute—and a minute can be long—before he rose from his seat, and mounted the platform to the bank of microphones.

"Gentlemen and Scientists," he began, "What you have just experienced is a new sensation to most of you. To all of you, I think. It is fear. I shall not take time now to describe to you the background of this composition. As sociologists, you are aware that no artist could generate fear without a reason for fear existing in the artist's environment—even a reason, as this one was, that went unexpressed and unheeded until the artist's crystallization of the emotion forced a search for the cause.

"Since I first heard this piece, I have had the CPS, the Council of Physical Scientists, at work on a difficult problem. Last week I had their answer. I shall return to that, and explain it in a few moments.

"But first, I must make an announcement. The findings of the CPS will constitute the reasons for my decision. Gentlemen, the future is in your hands. The Directorship is over. I, as the last Director, now, with the information I hold, have no ethical choice but to resign and leave the resolution of the problem in your hands. I shall subsequently apply for admission to your ranks, and hope that I may aid in finding the solution, but the problem is one of research, not management.

"We must find a new form of society. If we would keep our comforts and our way of life, if we would keep our race extant, and above all, if we would maintain our ethic, it is now incumbent upon us—upon you—to develop a civilization that does not rely on the laws of dynamics. A static society.

"Our government and our culture has rested on the unlimited principle of expansion, on continued dynamic development. The universe is large, large enough surely for a race so puny in comparison as ours. But not, I must now tell you, for a civilization constructed like ours.

"Many hundreds of years ago it was a habit of physicists and what were then known as metaphysicists to debate the problem of infinity. There were many differing opinions, and the conclusion in the end, was that the universe was infinite.

"I discovered, in a Council of the Physical Scientists, some months back, that this conclusion had never been proved. I set them the task of proving it. The answer I had last week dictated my actions of today. We must stop; we must change now, and find a new way of living that can exist without constant expansion, because, fellow Scientists, our universe has been finally established to be finite in nature!"

There was silence, but the expressions on the faces before him changed slowly, and he recognized feelings similar to his own. Dread! It had been there, submerged, but now it was out for all to see—the fear of a barrier that none could cross. To men who had lived their lives believing in the limitless of human expansion, the very thought of this truth was as deadly as their physically coming upon the barrier, the limit . . .

"There is only one alternative to stasis," Dangret said finally; "ancient philosophers were fond of saying that man was his own worst enemy. This has been, for many years, an unnecessary, if not a false, truth. Now we must recognize that man can expand only one further way. The frontiers are not yet gone, but they are vanishing. We must turn back upon a conquest of ourselves, or we must learn to live staticly. The problem I now leave in your hands. I hope . . ." and Dangret smiled, because humor, even in this crisis, was an integral part of his being, "I hope that after a brief period of personal stasis, I shall be admitted to your Council to help find a means for the conquests of man by man."

Dangret left the platform, and walked from the hall, without waiting for the shocked silence among the sociologists to articulate itself in words. Outside, he went directly to the apartment where Sarise had watched the scene on the com set.

He entered silently, walked over to where she still sat staring through open set at the hubbub in the hall, and put his hands gently on her two shoulders. She started slightly, and smiled wearily up at him. "So *that* was it?"

"Yes." His voice was tender and rough at the same time. "Yes, that was it. You see what you did. Oh, yes, *you* did it. You're an artist, and you saw things, knew things I didn't. You took my Directorship from me, didn't you? You took this house, and the glory and pleasure. You took everything I had from me, and you did it by being an artist. That was what I loved you for at first you know, and now . . ." He lifted his hands from her shoulders to cup her face. "Now I love you more than ever. The *least* you can do," and he smiled again, "is take me home to Tangerix III, and let me have a bit of personal stasis."

Despite the radical change in Man's policy of expansion in 101,950, his culture continued to thrive. In 312,552 the great robot migration began, ending with their mysterious and entire disappearance. The human species adjusted to the change gradually and a peaceful instability occupied them for a million years. By 1,562,430 the descendants of Earthmen were again seeking universal dominance—with Mother Earth forgotten.

METAMORPHOSITE

by Eric Frank Russell

THEY LET him pause halfway along the gangway so that his eyes could absorb the imposing scene. He stood in the middle of the high metal track, his left hand firmly grasping a side rail, and gazed into the four hundred foot chasm beneath. Then he studied the immense space vessels lying in adjacent berths, his stare tracing their gangways to their respective elevator towers behind which stood a great cluster of buildings whence the spaceport control column soared to the clouds. The height at which he stood, and the enormous dimensions of his surroundings, made him a little, doll-like figure, a man dwarfed by the mightiest works of man.

Watching him closely, his guards noted that he did not seem especially impressed. His eyes appeared to discard sheer dimensions while they sought the true meaning behind it all. His face was quite impassive as he looked around, but all his glances were swift, intelligent and assured. He comprehended things with that quick confidence which denotes an agile mind. One feature was prominent in the mystery enveloping him; it was evident that he was no dope.

Lieutenant Roka pushed past the two rearmost guards, leaned on the rail beside the silent watcher, and explained, "This is Madistine Spaceport. There are twenty others like it upon this planet. There are from two to twenty more on every one of four thousand other planets, and a few of them considerably bigger. The Empire is the greatest thing ever known or ever likely to be known. Now you see what you're up against."

"'Numbers and size,'" quoth the other. He smiled faintly and shrugged. "What of them?"

"You'll learn what!" Roka promised. He, too, smiled, his teeth showing white and clean. "An organization can grow so tremendous that it's far, far bigger than the men who maintain it. From then on, its continued growth and development are well-nigh inevitable. It's an irresistible force with no immovable object big enough to stop it. It's a juggernaut. It's destiny, or whatever you care to call it."

"Bigness," murmured the other. "How you love bigness." He leaned over the railing, peered into the chasm. "In all probability down there is an enemy you've not conquered yet."

"Such as what?" demanded Roka.

"A cancer bug." The other's eyes swung up, gazed amusedly into the lieutenant's. "Eh?" He shrugged again. "Alas, for brief mortality!"

"Move on," snapped Roka to the leading guard.

The procession shuffled on, two guards, then the prisoner, then Roka, then two more guards. Reaching the tower at the end of the track, the sextet took an elevator to ground level, found a jet car waiting for them, a long, black sedan with the Silver Comet of the Empire embossed on its sides. Two men uniformed in myrtle green occupied its front seats while a third stood by the open door at rear.

"Lieutenant Roka with the specimen and appropriate documents," said Roka. He indicated the prisoner with a brief gesture, then handed the third man a leather dispatch case. After that, he felt in one pocket, extracted a printed pad, added, "Sign here, please."

The official signed, returned the pad, tossed the dispatch case into the back of the car.

"All right," he said to the prisoner. "Get in."

Still impassive, the other got into the car, relaxed on the rear seat. Roka bent through the doorway, offered a hand.

"Well, sorry to see the last of you. We were just getting to know each other, weren't we? Don't get any funny ideas, will you? You're here under duress, but remember that you're also somewhat of an ambassador—that'll give you the right angle on things. Best of luck!"

"Thanks." The prisoner shook the proffered hand, shifted over as the green uniformed official clambered in beside him. The door slammed, the jets roared, the car shot smoothly off. The prisoner smiled faintly as he caught Roka's final wave.

"Nice guy, Roka," offered the official.

"Quite."

"Specimen," the official chuckled. "Always they call 'em specimens. Whether of human shape or not, any seemingly high or presumably intelligent form of life imported from any newly discovered planet is, in bureaucratic jargon, a specimen. So that's what you are, whether you like it or whether you don't. Mustn't let it worry you, though. Nearly every worthwhile specimen has grabbed himself a high official post when his planet has become part of the Empire."

"Nothing worries me," assured the specimen easily.

"No?"

"No."

The official became self-conscious. He picked the dispatch case off the floor, jiggled it aimlessly around, judged its weight, then flopped it on his lap. The two in front maintained grim silence and scowled steadily through the windshield as the car swung along a broad avenue.

At good speed they swooped over a humpback crossing, overtook a couple of highly colored, streamlined cars, swung left at the end of the avenue. This brought them up against a huge pair of metal gates set in a great stone wall. The place would have looked like a jail to the newcomer if he'd known what jails look like—which he didn't.

The gates heaved themselves open, revealing a broad drive which ran between well-tended lawns to the main entrance of a long, low building with a clock tower at its center. The entrance, another metal job heavy enough to withstand a howitzer, lay directly beneath the tower. The black sedan curved sidewise before it, stopped with a faint hiss of air brakes.

"This is it." The official at the back of the car opened a door, heaved himself out, dragging the case after him. His prisoner followed, shut the door, and the sedan swooped away.

"You see," said the man in green uniform. He gestured toward the lawns and the distant wall. "There's the wall, the gate, and a space from here to there in which you'd be immediately seen by the patrols. Beyond that wall are a thousand other hazards of which you know nothing. I'm telling you this because here's where you'll have your home until matters get settled. I would advise you not to let your impatience overcome your judgment, as others have done. It's no use running away when you've nowhere to run."

"Thanks," acknowledged the other. "I won't run until I've good reason and think I know where I'm going."

The official gave him a sharp look. A rather ordinary fellow, he decided, a little under Empire average in height, slender, dark, thirtyish and moderately good-looking. But possessed of the cockiness of youth. Under examination he'd probably prove boastful and misleading. He sighed his misgiving. A pity that they hadn't snatched somebody a good deal older.

"Harumph!" he said apropos of nothing.

He approached the door, the other following. The door opened of its own accord, the pair entered a big hall, were met by another official in myrtle green.

"A specimen from a new world," said the escort, "for immediate examination."

The second official stared curiously at the newcomer, sniffed in disdain, said, "O.K.—you know where to take him."

Their destination proved to be a large examination room at one end of a marble corridor. Here, the official handed over the dispatch case to a man in white, departed without further comment. There were seven men and one woman in the room, all garbed in white.

They studied the specimen calculatingly, then the woman asked, "You have learned our language?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then, you may undress. Remove all your clothes."

"Not likely!" said the victim in a level voice.

The woman didn't change expression. She bent over an official form lying on her desk, wrote in a neat hand in the proper section: "Sex convention normal." Then she went out.

When the door had shut behind her, the clothes came off. The seven got to work on the prisoner, completing the form as they went along. They did the job quietly, methodically, as an obvious matter of old-established routine. Height: four-point-two lineal units. Weight: seventy-seven migrads. Hair: type-S, with front peaked. No wisdom teeth. All fingers double-jointed. Every piece of data was accepted as if it were perfectly normal, and jotted down on the official form. Evidently they were accustomed to dealing with entities differing from whatever was regarded as the Empire norm.

They X-rayed his cranium, throat, chest and abdomen from front, back and both sides and dutifully recorded that something that wasn't an appendix was located where his appendix ought to be. Down went the details, every one of them. Membraned epiglottis. Optical astigmatism: left eye point seven, right eye point four. Lapped glands in throat in lieu of tonsils. Crenated ear lobes. Cerebral serrations complex and deep.

"Satisfied?" he asked when apparently they'd finished with him.

"You can put on your clothes."

The head man of the seven studied the almost completed form thoughtfully. He watched the subject dressing himself, noted the careful, deliberate manner in which the garments were resumed one by one. He called three of his assistants, conferred with them in low tones.

Finally he wrote at the bottom of the form: "Not necessarily a more advanced type, but definitely a variation. Possibly dangerous. Should be watched." Unlocking the dispatch case, he shoved the form in on top of the other papers it contained, locked the case, gave it to an assistant. "Take him along to the next stage."

Stage two was another room almost as large as its predecessor and made to look larger by virtue of comparative emptiness. Its sole furnishings consisted of an enormous carpet with pile so heavy it had to be waded through, also a large desk of glossy plastic and two pneumatic chairs. The walls were of translucite and the ceiling emitted a frosty glow.

In the chair behind the desk reposed a swarthy, saturnine individual with lean features and a hooked nose. His dress was dapper and a jeweled ring ornamented his left index finger. His black eyes gazed speculatively as the prisoner was marched the full length of the carpet and seated in the second chair. He accepted the leather case, unlocked it, spent a long time submitting its contents to careful examination.

In the end, he said, "So it took them eight months to get you here even at supra-spatial speed. *Tut tut,* how we grow! Life won't be long enough if this goes on. They've brought you a devil of a distance, eh? And they taught you our language on the way. Did you have much difficulty in learning it?"

"None," said the prisoner.

"You have a natural aptitude for languages, I suppose?"

"I wouldn't know."

The dark man leaned forward, a sudden gleam in his eyes. A faint smell of morocco leather exuded from him. His speech was smooth.

"Your answer implies that there is only one language employed on your home world."

"Does it?" The prisoner stared blankly at his questioner.

The other sat back again, thought for a moment, then went on, "It is easy to discern that you are not in the humor to be co-operative. I don't know why. You've been treated with every courtesy and consideration, or should have been. Have you any complaint to make on that score?"

"No," said the prisoner bluntly.

"Why not?" The dark man made no attempt to conceal his surprise. "This is the point where almost invariably I am treated to an impassioned tirade about kidnaping. But you don't complain?"

"What good would it do me?"

"No good whatever," assured the other.

"See?" The prisoner settled himself more comfortably in his chair. His smile was grim.

For a while, the dark man contemplated the jewel in his ring, twisting it this way and that to catch the lights from its facets. Eventually he wrote upon the form the one word: "Fatalistic," after which he murmured, "Well, we'll see how far we can get, anyway." He picked up a paper. "Your name is Harold Harold-Myra?"

"That's correct."

"Mine's Helman, by the way. Remember it, because you may need me sometime. Now this Harold-Myra—is that your family name?"

"It is the compound of my father's and mother's names."

"Hm-m-m! I suppose that that's the usual practice on your world?"

"Yes."

"What if you marry a girl named Betty?"

"My name would still be Harold-Myra," the prisoner informed. "Hers would still be the compound of her own parents' names. But our children would be called Harold-Betty."

"I see. Now according to this report, you were removed from a satellite after two of our ships had landed on its parent planet and failed to take off again."

"I was certainly removed from a satellite. I know nothing about your ships."

"Do you know why they failed to take off?"

"How could I? I wasn't there!"

Helman frowned, chewed his lower lip, then rasped, "It is I who am supposed to be putting the questions."

"Go ahead then," said Harold Harold-Myra.

"Your unspoken thought being, 'And a lot of good it may do you,'" put in Helman shrewdly. He frowned again, added the word:

"Stubborn" to the form before him. "It seems to me," he went on, "that both of us are behaving rather childishly. Mutual antagonism profits no one. Why can't we adopt the right attitude toward each other? Let's be frank, eh?" He smiled, revealing bright dentures. "I'll put my cards on the table and you put yours."

"Let's see yours."

Helman's smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He looked momentarily pained. "Distrustful" went down on the form. He spoke, choosing his words carefully.

"I take it that you learned a lot about the Empire during your trip here. You know that it is a mighty organization of various forms of intelligent life, most of them, as it happens, strongly resembling yours and mine, and all of them owing allegiance to the particular solar system in which you're now located. You have been told, or should have been told, that the Empire sprang from here, that throughout many, many centuries it has spread over four thousand worlds, and that it's still spreading."

"I've heard all of that," admitted the other.

"Good! Then you'll be able to understand that you're no more than a temporary victim of our further growth, but, in many ways, a lucky man."

"I fail to perceive the luck."

"You will, you will," soothed Helman. "All in good time." Mechanically, his smile had returned, and he was making an attempt at joviality. "Now I can assure you that an organization so old and so widespread as ours is not without a modicum of wisdom. Our science has given us incredible powers, including the power to blow whole worlds apart and desiccate them utterly, but that doesn't make us disregard caution. After a wealth of experience covering a multitude of planets we've learned that we're still not too great to be brought low. Indeed, for all our mighty power, we can err in manner disastrous to us all. So we step carefully."

"Sounds as if someone once put a scare into you," commented Harold Harold-Myra.

Helman hesitated, then said, "As a matter of fact, someone did. I'll tell you about it. Many decades ago we made a first landing on a new planet. The ship failed to take off. Our exploratory vessels always travel in threes, so a second vessel went down to the aid of its fellow. That didn't take off either. But the third ship, waiting in space, got a despairing message warning that the world held highly intelligent life of an elusive and parasitic type."

"And they confiscated the bodies you'd so kindly provided," suggested Harold.

"You know all about this life form?" Helman asked. His fingers slid toward an invisible spot on the surface of his desk.

"It's the first I've heard of them," replied the other. "Confiscation was logical."

"I suppose so," Helman admitted with some reluctance. He went on, his keen eyes on his listener. "They didn't get the chance to take over everyone. A few men realized their peril in the nick of time, locked themselves in one vessel away from the parasites and away from their stricken fellows. There weren't enough of them to take off, so they beamed a warning. The third ship saw the menace at once; if action wasn't taken swiftly it meant that we'd handed the keys of the cosmos to unknown powers. They destroyed both ships with one atomic bomb. Later, a task ship arrived, took the stern action we deemed necessary, and dropped a planet wrecker. The world dissolved into flashing gases. It was an exceedingly narrow squeak. The Empire, for all its wealth, ingenuity and might, could not stand if no citizen knew the real nature of his neighbor."

"A sticky situation," admitted Harold Harold-Myra. "I see now where I come in—I am a sample."

"Precisely." Helman was jovial again. "All we wish to discover is whether your world is a safe one."

"Safe for what?"

"For straightforward contact."

"Contact for what?" Harold persisted.

"Dear me! I'd have thought a person of your intelligence would see the mutual advantages to be gained from a meeting of different cultures."

"I can see the advantages all right. I can also see the consequences."

"To what do you refer?" Helman's amiability began to evaporate.

"Embodiment in your Empire."

"Tut," said Helman impatiently. "Your world would join us only of its own free will. In the second place, what's wrong with being part of the Empire? In the third, how d'you know that your opinions coincide with those of your fellows? They may think differently. They may prove eager to come in."

"It looks like it seeing that you've got two ships stuck there."

"Ah, then you admit that they're forcibly detained?"

"I admit nothing. For all I know, your crews may be sitting there congratulating themselves on getting away from the Empire—while my people are taking steps to throw them out."

Helman's lean face went a shade darker. His long, slender hands clenched and unclenched while his disciplined mind exerted itself to suppress the retort which his emotion strove to voice.

Then he said, "Citizens of the Empire don't run away from it. Those who do run don't get very far."

"A denial and an affirmative," commented Harold amusedly. "All in one breath. You can't have it both ways. Either they run or they don't."

"You know perfectly well what I meant." Helman, speaking slowly and evenly, wasn't going to let this specimen bait him. "The desire to flee is as remote as the uselessness of it is complete."

"The former being due to the latter?"

"Not at all!" said Helman sharply.

"You damn your ramshackle Empire with every remark you make," Harold informed. "I reckon I know it better than you do."

"And how do you presume to know our Empire?" inquired Helman. His brows arched in sarcastic interrogation. "On what basis do you consider yourself competent to judge it?"

"On the basis of history," Harold told him. "Your people are sufficiently like us to be like us—and if you can't understand that remark, well, I can't help it. On my world we're old, incredibly old, and we've learned a lot from a past which is long and lurid. We've had empires by the dozens, though none as great as yours. They all went the same way—down the sinkhole. They all vanished for the same fundamental and inevitable reasons. Empires come and empires go, but little men go on forever."

"Thanks," said Helman quickly. He wrote on the form: "Anarchistic," then, after further thought, added: "Somewhat of a crackpot."

Harold Harold-Myra smiled slowly and a little sadly. The writing was not within line of his vision, but he knew what had been written as surely as if he'd written it himself. To the people of his ancient planet it was not necessary to look at things in order to see them.

Pushing the form to one side, Helman said, "The position is that every time we make a landing we take the tremendous risk of presenting our secrets of space conquest to people of unknown abilities and doubtful ambitions. It's a chance that has to be taken. You understand that?" He noted the other's curt nod, then went on, "As matters stand at present, your world holds two of our best vessels. Your people, for all we can tell, may be able to gain a perfect understanding of them, copy them in large numbers, even improve on them. Your people may take to the cosmos, spreading ideas that don't coincide with ours. Therefore, in theory, the choice is war or peace. Actually, the choice for your people will be a simple one: co-operation or desiccation. I hate to tell you this, but your hostile manner forces me to do so."

"Uncommunicative might be a better word than hostile," suggested Harold Harold-Myra.

"Those who're not with us are against us," retorted Helman. "We're not being dictatorial; merely realistic. Upon what sort of information we can get out of you depends the action we take regarding your world. You are, you must understand, the representative of your kind. We are quite willing to accept that your people resemble you to within reasonable degree, and from our analysis of you we'll decide whether—"

"We get canonized or vaporized," put in Harold.

"If you like." Helman refused to be disturbed. He'd now acquired the *sang-froid* of one conscious of mastery. "It is for you to decide the fate of your planet. It's an enormous responsibility to place on one man's shoulders, but there it is, and you've got to bear it. And remember, we've other methods of extracting from you the information we require. Now, for the last time, are you willing to subject yourself to my cross-examination, or are you not?"

"The answer is," said Harold carefully, "not!"

"Very well then." Helman accepted it phlegmatically. He pressed the spot on his desk. "You compel me to turn from friendly interrogation to forcible analysis. I regret it, but it is your own choice." Two attendants entered, and he said to them, "Take him to stage three."

The escorting pair left him in this third and smaller room and he had plenty of time to look around before the three men engaged therein condescended to notice him. They were all in white, this trio, but more alert and less automatic than the white-garbed personnel of the medical examination room. Two of them were young, tall, muscular, and hard of countenance. The third was short, thickset, middle-aged and had a neatly clipped beard.

Briskly they were switching on a huge array of apparatus covering one wall of the room. The set-up was a mass of plastic panels, dials, meters, buttons, switches, sockets with corded plugs, and multiconnection pieces. From inside or close behind this affair came a low, steady hum. Before it, centrally positioned, was a chair.

Satisfied that all was in readiness, the bearded man said to Harold, "O.K., be seated." He signed to his two assistants who stepped forward as if eager to cope with a refusal.

Harold smiled, waved a negligent hand, sat himself in the chair. Working swiftly, the three attached cushioned metal bands to his ankles, calves, thighs, chest, neck and head. Flexible metal tubes ran from the bands to the middle of the apparatus while, in addition, the one about his head was connected to a thin, multicore cable.

They adjusted the controls to give certain readings on particular meters, after which the bearded one fixed glasses on his nose, picked up a paper, stared at it myopically. He spoke to the subject in the chair.

"I am about to ask you a series of questions. They will be so phrased that the answers may be given as simple negatives or affirmatives. You can please yourself whether or not you reply vocally—it is a matter of total indifference to me."

He glanced at Harold and his eyes, distorted into hugeness behind thick-lensed glasses, were cold and blank. His finger pressed a button; across the room a camera whirred into action, began to record the readings on the various meters.

Disregarding everything else, and keeping his attention wholly on the man in the chair, the bearded one said, "You were discovered on a satellite—yes or no?"

Harold grinned reminiscently, did not reply.

"Therefore your people know how to traverse space?"

No reply.

"In fact they can go further than to a mere satellite. They can reach neighboring planets—yes or no?"

No reply.

"Already they have explored neighboring planets?"

No reply.

"The truth is that they can do even better than that—they have reached other solar systems?"

He smiled once more, enigmatically.

"Your world is a world by itself?"

Silence.

"It is one of an association of worlds?"

Silence.

"It is the outpost world of another Empire?"

Silence.

"But that Empire is smaller than ours?"

No response.

"Greater than ours?"

"Heavens, I've been led to believe that yours is the greatest ever," said Harold sardonically.

"Be quiet!" One of the young ones standing at his side gave him an irate thrust on the shoulder.

"Or what?"

"Or we'll slap your ears off!"

The bearded man, who had paused expressionlessly through this brief interlude, carried on nonchalantly.

"Your kind are the highest form of life on your planet? There is no other intelligent life thereon? You knew of no other intelligent life anywhere previous to encountering emissaries of the Empire?"

The questioner was in no way disturbed by his victim's complete lack of response, and his bearing made that fact clear. Occasionally peering at the papers in his hand, but mostly favoring his listener with a cold, owlish stare, he ploughed steadily on. The questions reached one hundred, two hundred, then Harold lost count of them. Some were substitutes or alternatives for others, some made cross reference with others asked before or to be asked later, some were obvious traps. All were cogent and pointed. All met stubborn silence.

They finished at length, and the bearded one put away his papers with the grumbling comment, "It's going to take us all night to rationalize this lot!" He gave Harold a reproving stare. "You might just as well have talked in the first place. It would have saved us a lot of bother and gained you a lot of credit."

"Would it?" Harold was incredulous.

"Take him away," snapped the bearded man.

One of the young men looked questioningly at the oldster, who understood the unspoken query and responded, "No, not there. Not yet, anyway. It mightn't be necessary. Let's see what we've got first." He took off his glasses, scratched his beard. "Put him in his apartment. Give him something to eat." He cackled gratingly. "Let the condemned man eat a hearty meal."

The apartment proved to be compact, well-appointed, comfortable. Three rooms: bathroom, bedroom, sitting room, the latter with a filled bookcase, a large electric radiator, sunken heating panels for extra warmth, and a magniscreen television set.

Harold sprawled at ease in a soft, enveloping chair, watched a short-haired, burly man wheel in a generous meal. Hungry as he was, his attention didn't turn to the food. He kept it fixed on the burly man who, unconscious of the persistent scrutiny, methodically put out the meat, bread, fruit, cakes and coffee.

As the other finished his task, Harold said casually, "What are those lizardlike things that wear black uniforms with silver braid?"

"Dranes." Short-hair turned around, gazed dully at the prisoner. His face was heavy, muscular, his eyes small, his forehead low. "We calls 'em Dranes."

"Yes, but what are they?"

"Oh, just another life form, I guess. From some other planet—maybe from one called Drane. I dunno. I used to know, but I've forgotten."

"You don't like them, eh?" suggested Harold.

"Who does?" He frowned with the unusual strain of thought, his small eyes shrinking still smaller. "I like to have ideas of my own, see? I don't care for any lizards reading my mind and telling the world what I'd sooner keep to myself, see? A man wants privacy—especially sometimes."

"So they're telepaths!" It was Harold's turn to frown. "Hm-m-m!" He mused anxiously. The other began to shove his empty meal trolley toward the door, and Harold went on hurriedly, "Any of them hereabouts?"

"No, it's too late in the evening. And there ain't a lot of them on this planet, thank Pete! Only a few here. They do some sort of official work, I dunno what. A couple of them got important jobs right in this dump, but they'll be home now. Good riddance, I says!" He scowled to show his intense dislike of the mysterious Dranes. "A guy can think what he likes while they're away." He pushed his trolley outside, followed it and closed the door. The lock clicked quietly, ominously.

Harold got on with his meal while he waited for angry men to come for him. Beardface and his two assistants had indicated that nothing more would be done with him before morning, but this last episode would speed things up considerably. He hastened his eating, vaguely surprised that he was getting it finished without interruption. They were less quick on the uptake than he'd anticipated. He employed the time usefully in working out a plan of campaign.

The apartment made his problem tough. He'd already given it a thorough scrutiny, noted that its decorated walls and doors were all of heavy metal. The windows were of armorglass molded in one piece over metal frames with sturdy, closely set bars. It was more than an apartment; it was a vault.

There was a very tiny lens cunningly concealed in the wall high up in one corner. It would have escaped discovery by anyone with lesser powers of observation. He'd found another mounted on the stem of the hour hand of the clock. It looked like a jewel. He knew it to be a scanner of some kind, and suspected that there were others yet to be found. Where there were scanners there would also be microphones, midget jobs hard to dig out when you don't want to make a search too obvious. Oh, yes, they'd know all about his little conversation with Short-hair—and they'd be along.

They were. The lock clicked open just as he ended his meal. Helman came in followed by a huge fellow in uniform. The latter closed the door, leaned his broad back against it, pursed his lips in a silent whistle while he studied the room with obvious boredom. Helman went to a chair, sat in it, crossed his legs, looked intently at the prisoner. A vein pulsed in his forehead and the effect of it was menacing.

He said, "I've been on the televox to Roka. He swears that he's never mentioned the Dranes in your presence. He's positive that they've never been mentioned or described in your hearing by anyone on the ship. Nothing was said about them by the guards who brought you here. You've seen none in this building. So how d'you know about them?"

"Mystifying, isn't it?" commented Harold pleasantly.

"There is only one way in which you could have found out about the Dranes," Helman went on. "When the examiners finished with you in stage three an assistant pondered the notion of passing you along to stage four, but the idea was dropped for the time being. Stage four is operated by the Dranes."

"Really?" said Harold. He affected polite surprise.

"The Dranes were never mentioned," persisted Helman, his hard eyes fixed on his listener, "but they were thought of. You read those thoughts. You are a telepath!"

"And you're surprised by the obvious?"

"It wasn't obvious because it wasn't expected," Helman retorted. "On four thousand worlds there are only eleven truly telepathic life forms and not one of them human in shape. You're the first humanoid possessing that power we've discovered to date."

"Nevertheless," persisted Harold, "it should have been obvious. My refusal to co-operate—or my stubbornness as you insist on calling it—had good reason. I perceived all the thoughts behind your questions. I didn't like them. I still don't like them."

"Then you'll like even less the ones I'm thinking now," snapped Helman.

"I don't," Harold agreed. "You've sent out a call for the Dranes, ordered them to come fast, and you think they'll be here pretty soon. You expect them to suck me dry. You've great confidence in their powers even though you can't conceive the full extent of mine." He stood up, smiled as Helman uncrossed his legs with a look of sudden alarm. He stared into Helman's black eyes, and his own were sparkling queerly. "I think," he said, "that this is a good time for us to go trundle our hoops—don't you?"

"Yes," Helman murmured. Clumsily he got to his feet, stood there with an air of troubled preoccupation. "Yes, sure!"

The guard at the door straightened up, his big hands held close to his sides. He looked inquiringly at the vacant Helman. When Helman failed to respond, he shifted his gaze to the prisoner, kept the gaze fixed while slowly the alertness faded from his own optics.

Then, although he'd not been spoken to, he said hoarsely, "O.K., we'll get along. We'll get a move on." He opened the door.

The three filed out, the guard leading, Helman in the rear. They moved rapidly along the corridors, passing other uniformed individuals without challenge or comment until they reached the main hall. Here, the man in myrtle green, whose little office held the lever controlling the automatic doors, sat at his desk and felt disposed to be officious.

"You can't take him out until you've signed him out, stating where he's being taken, and on whose authority," he enunciated flatly.

"On my authority," said Helman. He voiced the words in stilted tones as if he were a ventriloquist's dummy, but the officious one failed to notice it.

"Oh, all right," he growled. He shoved a large, heavy tome to one end of his desk. "Sign there. Name in column one, destination in column two, time of return in column three." He looked at the huge guard who was watching dumbly, emitted a resigned sigh, inquired, "I suppose you need a car?"

"Yes," said Helman mechanically.

The official pressed a button; a sonorous gong clanged somewhere outside the building. Then he pulled his tiny lever; the great doors swung open. The trio strolled out with deceptive casualness, waited a moment while the doors closed behind them. It was fairly dark now, but not completely so, for a powdering of stars lay across the sky, and a steady glow of light emanated from the surrounding city.

Presently a jet car swept around one end of the building, stopped before them. The three got in. Harold sat at the back between Helman and the big guard, both of whom were strangely silent, ruminative. The driver turned around, showed them a face with raised eyebrows.

"Downtown," uttered Helman curtly.

The driver nodded, faced front. The car rolled toward the gates in the distant wall, reached them, but they remained closed. Two men in green emerged from the shadow of the wall, focused light beams on the vehicle's occupants.

One said, "Inquisitor Helman, one specimen—I guess it's O.K." He waved his light beam toward the gates which parted slowly and ponderously. Emitting a roar from its jets, the car swept through.

They dropped Harold Harold-Myra in the mid-southern section of the city where buildings grew tallest and crowds swarmed thickest. Helman and the guard got out of the car, talked with him while the driver waited out of earshot.

"You will both go home," Harold ordered, "remembering nothing of this and behaving normally. Your forgetfulness will persist until sunrise. Until you see the sun you will be quite unable to recall anything which has occurred since you entered my room. Do you understand?"

"We understand."

Obediently they got back into the car. They were a pair of automatons. He stood on the sidewalk, watched their machine merge into the swirl of traffic and disappear. The sky was quite dark now, but the street was colorful with lights that shifted and flickered and sent eccentric shadows skittering across the pavement.

For a few minutes he stood quietly regarding the shadows and musing within himself. He was alone—alone against a world. It didn't bother him particularly. His situation was no different from that of his own people who formed a solitary world on the edge of a great Empire. He'd one advantage which so far had stood him in good stead: he knew his own powers. His opponents were ignorant in that respect. On the other hand, he suffered the disadvantage of being equally ignorant, for although he'd learned much about the people of the Empire, he still did not know the full extent of their powers. And theirs were likely to be worthy of respect. Alliance of varied life forms with varied talents could make a formidable combination. The battle was to be one of *homo superior* versus *homo sapiens* plus the Dranes plus other things of unknown abilities—with the odds much in favor of the combine.

Now that he was foot-loose and fancy-free he could appreciate that guard's argument that there's no point in being free unless one knows where to nurse one's freedom. The guard, though, had implied something and overlooked something else. He'd implied that there were places in which freedom could be preserved, and he'd forgotten that escapees have a flair for discovering unadvertised sanctuaries. If his own kind were half as wise and a quarter as crafty as they ought to be, thought Harold, the tracing of such a sanctuary should not be difficult.

He shrugged, turned to go, found himself confronted by a tall, thin fellow in black uniform with silver buttons and silver braid. The newcomer's features were gaunt and tough, and they changed color from gold to blood-red as the light from a nearby electric sign flickered over it.

Harold could hear the other's mind murmuring, *"Queer, outlandish clothes this fellow's wearing. Evidently a recent importee—maybe a specimen on the lam,"* even as the thinker's mouth opened and he said audibly, "Let me see your identity card!"

"Why?" asked Harold, stalling for time. Curse the clothes—he'd not had time to do anything about them yet.

"It's the regulation," the other returned irritably. "You should know that every citizen must produce his card when called upon to do so by the police." His eyes narrowed, his mind spoke silently but discernibly. *"Ah, he hesitates. It must be that he doesn't possess a card. This looks bad!"* He took a step forward.

Harold's eyes flamed with an odd glow. "You don't really want to see my card?" he said gently. "Do you?"

The policeman had a momentary struggle with himself before he answered, "No . . . no . . . of course not!"

"It was just your mistake?"

"Just my mistake!" admitted the other slowly. His mind was now completely muddled. A random thought, *"He's dangerous!"* fled wildly through the cerebral maze, pursued, outshouted and finally silenced by other, violently imposed thoughts saying, *"Silly mistake. Of course he's got a card. I interfere too much."*

With shocking suddenness, another thought broke in, registering clearly and succintly despite the telepathic hubbub of a hundred surrounding minds. *"By the Blue Sun, did you catch that, Gaeta? A fragment of hypnotic projection! Something about a card. Turn the car round!"*

A cold sweat beaded on Harold's spine, he closed his mind like a trap, sent his sharp gaze along the road. There was too great a flood of cars and too many swiftly changing lights to enable him to pick out any one vehicle turning in the distance. But he'd know that car if it came charging down upon him. Its driver might be of human shape, but its passengers would be lizardlike.

Machines whirled past him four, five and sometimes six abreast. The eerie voice which had faded suddenly came back, waxed strong, faded away again.

It said, *"I might be wrong, of course. But I'm sure the amplitude was sufficient for hypnosis. No, it's gone now—I can't pick it up at all. All these people make too much of a jumble on the neural band!"*

Another thought, a new one, answered impatiently, *"Oh, let it pass, you're not on duty now. If we don't—"* It waned to indiscernibility.

Then the policeman's mind came back, saying, *"Well, why am I standing here like a dummy? Why was I picking on this guy? It must've been for something! I didn't stop him for the fun of it—unless I'm scatty!"*

Harold said quickly and sharply, "You didn't stop me. I stopped you. Intelligence Service—remember?"

"Eh?" The cop opened his mouth, closed it, looked confused.

"Wait a moment," added Harold, a strong note of authority in his voice. He strained his perception anxiously. A river of surrounding thoughts flowed through his mind, but none with the power and clarity of the invisible Gaeta and his alert companion. Could they, too, close their minds? There wasn't any way of telling!

He gave it up, returned his attention to the cop, and said, "Intelligence Service. I showed you my official warrant. Good heavens, man, have you forgotten it already?"

"No." The man in black was disconcerted by this unexpected aggressiveness. The reference to a nonexistent Intelligence Service warrant made his confusion worse confounded. "No," he protested, "I haven't forgotten." Then, in weak effort to make some sort of a come-back. "But you started to say something, and I'm waiting to hear the rest."

Harold smiled, took him by the arm. "Look, I'm authorized to call upon you for assistance whenever needed. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, sure, but—"

"What I want you to do is very simple. It's necessary that I change attire with a certain suspected individual and that he be kept out of circulation overnight. I'll point him out to you when he comes along. You're to tell him that you're taking him in for interrogation. You'll then conduct us somewhere where we can change clothes, preferably your own apartment if you've got one. I'll give you further instructions when we get there."

"All right," agreed the cop. He blinked as he tried to rationalize his mind. Thoughts gyrated bafflingly in his cranium. *"Not for you to reason why. Do your duty and ask no questions. Let higher-ups take the responsibility. This guy's got all the authority in the world—and he knows what he's doing."* There was something not quite right about those thoughts. They seemed to condense inward instead of expanding outward, as thoughts ought to do. But they were powerful enough, sensible enough, and he wasn't able to give birth to any contrary ideas. "All right," he repeated.

Studying the passers-by, Harold picked a man of his own height and build. Of all the apparel streaming past, this fellow's looked made to fit him to a nicety. He nudged the cop.

"That's the man."

The officer strode majestically forward, stopped the victim, said, "Police! I'm taking you in for interrogation."

"Me?" The man was dumfounded. "I've done nothing!"

"Then what've you got to worry about?"

"Nothing," hastily assured the other. He scowled with annoyance. "I guess I'll have to go. But it's a waste of time and a nuisance."

"So you think the Empire's business is a nuisance?" inquired Harold, joining the cop.

The victim favored him with a look of intense dislike, and complained, "Go on, try making a case against me. Having it stick will be something else!"

"We'll see!"

Cutting down a side street, the trio hit a broad avenue at its farther end. No cars here; it was solely for pedestrians. The road was divided into six moving strips, three traveling in each direction, slowest on the outsides, fastest in the middle. Small groups of people, some chatting volubly, some plunged in boredom, glided swiftly along the road and shrank in the distance. A steady rumbling sound came from beneath the rubbery surface of the road.

The three skipped onto an outer slow strip, thence to the medium fast strip, finally to the Central rapid strip. The road bore them ten blocks before they left it. Harold could see it rolling on for at least ten blocks more.

The cop's apartment proved to be a modernistic, three-roomed bachelor flat on the second floor of a tall, graystone building. Here, the captive started to renew his protests, looked at Harold, found his opinions changing even as he formed them. He waxed co-operative, though in a manner more stupefied than willing. Emptying the contents of his pockets on a table, he exchanged clothes.

Now dressed in formal, less outlandish manner, Harold said to the police officer, "Take off your jacket and make yourself at home. No need to be formal on this job. We may be here some time yet. Get us a drink while I tell this fellow what's afoot." He waited until the cop had vanished into an adjoining room, then his eyes flamed at the vaguely disgruntled victim. "Sleep!" he commanded, "sleep!"

The man stirred in futile opposition, closed his eyes, let his head hang forward. His whole body slumped wearily in its chair. Raking rapidly through the personal possessions on the table, Harold found the fellow's identity card. Although he'd never seen such a document before, he wasted no time examining it, neither did he keep it. With quick dexterity, he dug the cop's wallet out of his discarded jacket, extracted the police identity card, substituted the other, replaced the wallet. The police card he put in his own pocket. Way back on the home planet it was an ancient adage that double moves are more confusing that single ones.

He was barely in time. The cop returned with a bottle of pink, oily liquid, sat down, looked dully at the sleeper, said, "Huh?" and transferred his lackluster stare to Harold. Then he blinked several times, each time more slowly than before, as if striving to keep his eyes open against an irresistible urge to keep them shut. He failed. Imitating his captive, he hung his head—and began to snore.

"Sleep," murmured Harold, "sleep on toward the dawn. Then you may awake. But not before!"

Leaning forward, he lifted a small, highly polished instrument from its leather case beneath the policeman's armpit. A weapon of some sort. Pointing it toward the window, he pressed the stud set in its butt. There was a sharp, hard crack, but no recoil. A perfect disk of glassite vanished from the center of the window. Cold air came in through the gap, bringing with it a smell like that of roasted resin. Giving the weapon a grim look, he shoved it back into its holster, dusted his fingers distastefully.

"So," he murmured, "discipline may be enforced by death. Verily, I'm back in the dark ages!"

Ignoring the sleepers, he made swift search of the room. The more he knew about the Empire's ordinary, everyday citizens the better it'd be for him. Knowledge—the right knowledge—was a powerful arm in its own right. His people understood the value of intangibles.

Finished, he was about to leave when a tiny bell whirred somewhere within the wall. He traced the sound as emanating from behind a panel, debated the matter before investigating further. Potential danger lurked here; but nothing ventured, nothing gained. He slid the panel aside, found himself facing a tiny loudspeaker, a microphone, a lens, and a small, circular screen.

The screen was alive and vivid with color, and a stern, heavily jowled face posed in sharp focus within its frame. The caller raked the room with one quick, comprehending glance, switched his attention to Harold.

"So the missing Guarda *is* indisposed," he growled. "He slumbers before a bottle. He awaits three charges: absent from duty, improperly dressed, and drunk! We'll deal with this at once." He thinned his lips. "What is your name and the number of your identity card, citizen?"

"Find out," suggested Harold. He slammed the panel before the tiny scanner could make a permanent record of his features—if he had not done so already.

That was an unfortunate episode: it cut down his self-donated hours of grace to a few minutes. They'd be on their way already, and he'd have to move out fast.

He was out of the apartment and the building in a trice. A passing car stopped of its own accord and took him downtown. Its driver was blissfully unaware of the helplessness of his own helpfulness.

Here, the city seemed brighter than ever mostly because the deeper darkness of the sky enhanced the multitude of lights. A few stars still shone, and a string of colored balls drifted high against the backdrop where some unidentifiable vessel drove into space.

He merged with the crowds still thronging the sidewalks. There was safety in numbers. It's hard to pick one guy out of the mob, especially when he's dressed like the mob, behaves like the mob. For some time he moved around with the human swarm though his movements were not as aimless. He was listening to thoughts, seeking either of two thought-forms, one no more than slightly helpful, the other important. He found the former, not the latter.

A fat man wandered past him and broadcast the pleasurable notion of food shared in large company. He turned and followed the fat man, tracking him along three streets and another moving avenue. The fat man entered a huge restaurant with Harold at his heels. They took an unoccupied table together.

Plenty of active thoughts here. In fact the trouble was that there were far too many. They made a constant roar right across the telepathic band; it was difficult to separate one from another, still more difficult to determine who was emanating which. Nevertheless, he persisted in his effort to sort out individual broadcasts, taking his food slowly to justify remaining there as long as possible. Long after the fat man had left he was still seated there, listening, listening. There were many thoughts he found interesting, some revealing, some making near approach to the notions he sought, but none quite on the mark, not one.

In the end, he gave it up, took his check from the waiter. It was readily apparent what the waiter had on his mind, namely, this crazy stuff called money. Roka had told him a lot about money, even showing him samples of the junk. He remembered that Roka had been dumfounded by his ignorance concerning a common medium of exchange. With amusing superiority, the worthy lieutenant had assumed that Harold's people had yet to discover what they'd long since forgotten.

There had been some of this money—he didn't know just how much—in the pockets of this suit, but he'd left it all with the suit's hapless donor. There wasn't any point in snatching someone else's tokens. Besides, having managed without it all his life he wasn't going to become a slave to it now.

He paid the waiter with nothing, putting it into the fellow's hand with the lordly air of one dispensing a sizable sum. The waiter gratefully accepted nothing, put nothing into his pocket, initialed the check, bowed obsequiously. Then he rubbed his forehead, looked vague and confused, but said nothing. Harold went out.

It was on the sidewalk Harold made the contact he was seeking, though not in the manner he'd expected. He was looking for a mutinous thinker who might lead him to the underworld of mutinous thinkers. Instead, he found a friend.

The fellow was twenty yards away and walking toward him with a peculiarly loose-jointed gait. He was humanoid in all respects but one—his skin was reptilian. It was a smooth but scaly skin of silvery gray in which shone an underlying sheen of metallic blue. The pupils of his eyes were a very light gray, alert, intelligent.

Those eyes looked straight into Harold's as they came abreast, a flood of amity poured invisibly from them as he smiled and said in an undertone, "Come with me." He walked straight on, without a pause. He didn't look back to see whether Harold followed.

Harold didn't wait to consider the matter. This was a time for quick decision. Swiveling on one heel he trailed along behind the speaker. And as he trod warily after the other, his mind was active with thoughts, and his thinking was done within a mental shell through which nothing could probe.

Evidently the scaly man was an outsider, a product of some other world. His queer skin was proof of that. There were other factors, too. He hadn't read Harold's mind—Harold was positive of that—yet in some strange, inexplicable way he'd recognized a kinship between them and had acknowledged it without hesitation. Moreover, he was strolling along with his mind wide open, but Harold was totally unable to analyze his thoughts. Those thoughts, in all probability, were straightforward and logical enough, but they oscillated in and out of the extreme edge of the neural band. Picking them up was like trying to get frequency modulation on a receiver designed for amplitude modulation. Those thought-forms might be normal, but their wave-forms were weird.

Still not looking back, the subject of his speculations turned into an apartment building took a levitator to the tenth floor. Here he unlocked a door, gazed around for the first time, smiled again at his follower, motioned him inside.

Harold went in. The other closed the door after him. There were two similar entities in the apartment. One sat on the edge of a table idly swinging his legs; the other lounged on a settee and was absorbed in a magazine.

"Oh, Melor, there's a—" began the one on the settee. He glanced up, saw the visitor, grinned in friendly fashion. Then his expression changed to one of surprise, and he said, "By the everlasting light, it's *you!* Where did you find him, Melor?"

This one's mind was fully as baffling and Harold found himself unable to get anything out of it. The same applied to the being perched upon the table: his thoughts wavered in and out of the borderline of detection.

"I found him on the street," replied the one called Melor, "and I invited him along. He has a most attractive smell." He sat down, invited Harold to do likewise. Looking at the one on the settee, he went on, "What did you mean by, 'Oh, it's *you*'? D'you know him?"

"No." The other switched on a teleset at his side. "They broadcast a call for him a few minutes ago. He's wanted—badly." He moved a second switch. "Here's the recording. Watch!"

The set's big screen lit up. A sour-faced man in flamboyant uniform appeared on the screen, spoke with official ponderousness.

"All citizens are warned to keep watch for and, if possible, apprehend an escaped specimen recently brought from the Frontier. Name: Harold Harold-Myra. Description—" He went on at great length, giving everything in minute detail, then finished, "His attire is noticeably unconventional and he has not yet been provided with an identity card. Citizens should bear in mind that he may possess attributes not familiar to Empire races and that he is wanted alive. In case of necessity, call Police Emergency on Stud Four. Here is his likeness."

The screen went blank, lit up again, showed Harold's features in full color. He recognized part of his former prison in the background. Those midget scanners had done their job!

"Tush!" scoffed the being on the settee. He switched off, turned to Harold. "Well, you're in good hands. That's something. We wouldn't give anyone in authority a magni-belt to hold up his pants. My name's Tor. The one industriously doing nothing on the table is Vern. The one who brought you here is Melor. Our other names don't

matter much. As maybe you've guessed, we aren't of this lousy, overorganized world. We're from Linga, a planet which is a devil of a long way off, too far away for my liking. The more I think of it, the farther it seems."

"It's no farther than my own world," said Harold. He leaned forward. "Look, can you read my mind?"

"Not a possibility of it," Tor answered. "You're like the local breed in that respect—you think pulsatingly and much too far down for us. Can you read ours?"

"I can't. You wobble in and out of my limit." He frowned. "What beats me is what made Melor pick me out if he can't read my thoughts."

"I smelled you," Melor put in.

"Huh?"

"That's not strictly correct, but it's the best way I can explain it. Most of the Empire's peoples have some peculiar faculty they call a sense of smell. We don't possess it. They talk about bad odors and sweet ones, which is gibberish to us. But we can sense affinities and oppositions, we can sort of 'smell' friends and enemies, instantly, infallibly. Don't ask me how we do it, for how can I tell you?"

"I see the difficulty," agreed Harold.

"On our world," Melor continued, "most life forms have this sense which seems peculiar to Linga. We've no tame animals and no wild ones—they're tame if you like them, wild if you don't. None would be driven by curiosity to make close approach to a hunter, none would flee timidly from someone anxious to pet them. Instinctively they know which is friend and which is enemy. They know it as certainly as you know black from white or night from day."

Tor put in, "Which is an additional reason why we're not very popular. Skin trouble's the basic one, d'you understand? So among an appalling mixture of hostile smells we welcome an occasional friendly one—as yours is."

"Do the Dranes smell friendly?"

Tor pulled a face. "They stink!" he said with much emphasis. Gazing ruminatively at the blank television screen, he went on, "Well, the powers-that-be are after your earthly body, and I'm afraid we can't offer you much encouragement though we're willing to give you all the help we can. Something like twenty specimens have escaped in the last ten or twelve years. All of them broke loose by suddenly displaying long-concealed and quite unexpected powers which caught their captors by surprise. But none stayed free. One by one they were roped in, some sooner than others. You can't use your strength without revealing what you've got, and once the authorities know what you've got they take steps to cope with it. Sooner or later the fugitive makes a try for his home planet—and finds the trappers waiting."

"They're going to have a long, long wait," Harold told him, "for I'm not contemplating a return to my home world. Leastways, not yet. What's the use of coming all the way here just to go all the way back again?"

"We took it that you hadn't much choice about the coming," said Tor.

"Nor had I. Circumstances made it necessary for me to come. Circumstances make it necessary for me to stay awhile."

The three were mildly surprised by this phlegmatic attitude.

"I'm more of a nuisance here," Harold pointed out. "This is the Empire's key planet. Whoever bosses this world bosses the Empire. It may be one man, it may be a small clique, but on this planet is the mind or minds which make the Empire tick. I'd like to retime that tick."

"You've *some* hopes!" opined Tor gloomily. "The Big Noise is Burkinshaw Three, the Lord of Terror. You've got to have forty-two permits, signed and countersigned, plus an armed escort, to get within sight of him. He's exclusive!"

"That's tough, but the situation is tougher." He relaxed in his chair and thought awhile. "There's a Lord of Terror on every planet, isn't there? It's a cockeyed title for the bosses of imperial freedom!"

"Terror means greatness, superior wisdom, intellect of godlike quality," explained Tor.

"Oh, does it? My mistake! We use the same-sounding word on my planet, and there it means fear." Suddenly a strange expression came into his face. He ejaculated, "Burkinshaw! Burkinshaw! Ye gods!"

"What's the matter?" Melor inquired.

"Nothing much. It's only that evidence is piling up on top of a theory. It should help. Yes, it ought to help a lot." Getting up, he paced the room restlessly. "Is there an underground independence movement on Linga?" he asked.

Tor grinned with relish, and said, "I'd not be far from the truth if I guessed that there's such a movement on every planet excepting this one. Imperially speaking, we're all in the same adolescent condition:

not quite ripe for self-government. We'll all get independence tomorrow, but not today." He heaved a resigned sigh. "Linga's been getting it tomorrow for the last seven hundred years."

"As I thought," Harold commented. "The same old set-up. The same old stresses, strains and inherent weaknesses. The same blindness and procrastination. We've known it all before—it's an old, old tale to us."

"What is?" persisted the curious Melor.

"History," Harold told him.

Melor looked puzzled.

"There's an ancient saying," Harold continued, "to the effect that the bigger they come the harder they fall. The more ponderous and top-heavy a structure the riper it is for toppling." He rubbed his chin, studied his listeners with a peculiarly elfish gaze. "So the problem is whether we can shove hard enough to make it teeter."

"Never!" exclaimed Tor. "Nor a thousand either. It's been tried times without number. The triers got buried—whenever there was enough to bury."

"Which means that they tried in the wrong way, and/or at the wrong time. It's up to us to push in the right way at the right time."

"How can you tell the right time?"

"I can't. I can choose only the time which, when everything's taken into account, seems the most favorable—and then hope that it's the right time. It'll be just my hard luck if I'm wrong." He reflected a moment, then went on, "The best time ought to be nine days hence. If you can help me to keep under cover that long, I'll promise not to involve you in anything risky in the meanwhile. Can you keep me nine days?"

"Sure we can." Tor regarded him levelly. "But what do we get out of it other than the prospect of premature burial?"

"Nothing except the satisfaction of having had a finger in the pie."

"Is that all?" Tor asked.

"That's all," declared Harold positively. "You Lingans must fight your way as we're fighting ours. If ever my people help you, it will be for the sake of mutual benefit or our own satisfaction. It won't be by way of reward."

"That suits me." Tor said flatly. "I like good, plain talk, with no frills. We're tired of worthless promises. Count us with you to the base of the scaffold, but not up the steps—we'd like to indulge second thoughts before we mount those!"

"Thanks a lot," acknowledged Harold gratefully. "Now here are some ideas I've got which—"

He stopped as the television set emitted a loud chime. Tor reached over, switched on the apparatus. Its screen came to life, depicting the same uniformed sourpuss as before.

The official rumbled, "Urgent call! Citizens are warned that the escaped specimen Harold Harold-Myra, for whom a call was broadcast half an hour ago, is now known to be a telepath, a mesman, a seer and a recorder. It is possible that he may also possess telekinetic powers of unknown extent. Facts recently brought to light suggest that he's a decoy and therefore doubly dangerous. Study his likeness; he must be brought in as soon as possible."

The screen blanked, lit up again, showed Harold's face for a full minute. Then the telecast cut off.

"What does he mean, a seer and a recorder?" inquired Harold, mystified.

"A seer is one who makes moves in anticipation of two, three, four or more of his opponent's moves. A chessmaster is a seer."

"Heavens, do they play chess here, too?"

"Chess is popular all over the Empire. What of it?"

"Never mind," said Harold. "We'll stick the fact on top of the pile. Go on."

"A recorder," explained Tor, "is someone with a photographic memory. He doesn't write anything down. He remembers it all, accurately, in full detail."

"Humph! I don't think there's anything extraordinary about that."

"We Lingans can't do it. In fact, we know of only four life forms that can." Respect crept into Tor's snake-skinned face. "And do you really have telekinetic power as well?"

"No. It's a false conclusion to which they've jumped. They appear to think I'm a poltergeist or something—goodness only knows why." He mused a moment. "Maybe it's because of that analysis in stage three. I can control my heart beats, my blood pressure, my thoughts, and I made their analytical apparatus go haywire. They can get out of it nothing but contradictory nonsense. Evidently they suspect that I sabotaged its innards by some form of remote control."

"Oh!" Tor was openly disappointed.

Before any of them could venture further remark, the television set called for attention and Sourpuss appeared for the third time.

"All nonnative citizens will observe a curfew tonight from midnight until one hour after dawn," he droned. "During this period the police may call at certain apartments. Any nonnative citizens found absent from their apartments and unable to give satisfactory reason therefor, or any nonnative citizens who obstruct the police in the execution of their duty, will be dealt with in accordance with pan-planetary law." He paused, stared out of the screen. He looked bellicose. "The fugitive, Harold Harold-Myra, is in possession of identity card number AMB 307-40781, entered in the name of Robertus Bron. That is all."

"Bron," echoed Harold. "Bron . . . Burkinshaw . . . chessmasters. Dear me!"

The three Lingans were apprehensive, and Melor ventured, "You can see their moves. One: they're satisfied that by now you've found a hiding place. Two: they know you're hiding with outsiders and not with natives. Since there aren't more than sixty thousands of outsiders on this planet, sharing one third that number of apartments, it's not impossible to pounce on the lot at one go." His forehead wrinkled with thought. "It's no use you fleeing elsewhere because this curfew is planet-wide. It covers everywhere. I reckon your easiest way out would be to hypnotize a native and stay in his apartment overnight. If, as they say, you're a mesman, it should be easy."

"Except for one thing."

"What is that?"

"It's what they expect me to do. In fact, it's what they're trying to make me do."

"Even so," persisted Melor, "what's to stop you?"

"The routine. A master race always has a routine. It's drilled into them; it's part of their education. Having been warned that a badly wanted specimen is on the loose and about to bolt, they will take the officially prescribed precautions." He grinned at them reassuringly, but they didn't derive much comfort from it. "I can only guess what that routine will be, but I reckon it'll include some method of advertising my presence in a native's apartment even though its occupant is helpless. Scanners coupled to the Police Emergency system and switched in by the opening of a door, or something like that. When I take risks, I pick my own. It's asking for trouble to let the opposition pick 'em for you."

"Maybe you're right," agreed Melor. "We do know that local people have certain facilities denied to outsiders."

"Now if a couple of cops come along to give this place a look over, and I take control of their minds and send them away convinced that I'm just another Lingan, the powers-that-be will have been fooled, won't they?"

"I hadn't thought of that," put in Tor. He was disgusted with his own lack of imagination. "It was so obvious that I didn't see it."

"So obvious," Harold pointed out, "that the authorities know that's just what would occur should they find me here."

"Then why the curfew and the search?"

"Bluff!" defined Harold. "They hope to make me move or, failing that, put scare into those harboring me. They're banging on the walls hoping the rat will run. I won't run! With your kind permission, I'll sit tight."

"You're welcome to stay," Tor assured. "We can find you a spare bed, and if you—"

"Thanks!" Harold interrupted, "but I don't need one. I don't sleep."

"You don't!" They were dumfounded.

"Never slept a wink in my life. It's a habit we've abandoned." He walked around the room, studying its fittings. "Impatience is the curse of plotters. Nothing bores me more than waiting for time to ripen. I've simply got to wait nine days. Are you really willing to put up with me that long or, if not, can you find me some place else?"

"Stay here," said Tor. "You repay us with your company. We can talk to each other of homes beyond reach. We can talk about the freedom of subject peoples and of things it is not wise to discuss outside. It is sweet to dream dreams. It is good to play with notions of what one might do if only one could find a way to do it."

"You're a little pessimistic," gibed Harold.

On the fourth day his idleness became too much to bear. He went out, strolled along the streets of the city. Two more irate broadcasts had advertised his extended liberty, but the last of them had been three days before. Since then, silence.

His trust reposed in the inability of the public to remember that morning's broadcast, let alone the details of the twentieth one before it, and his confidence was not misplaced. People wandered past him with vacant expressions and preoccupied minds. In most cases, their eyes looked at him without seeing him. In a few cases, his features registered, but no significance registered with them. The farther he walked, the safer he felt.

Downtown he found a smart, modernistic store well stocked with scientific instruments. This simplified matters. He'd been trying to solve the problem of how to get Melor to shop for him without using this silly stuff called money. The Lingan's respect for it equalled his own contempt for it, therefore he couldn't ask his hosts to spend their own on his behalf. Instinct rather than deliberate reasoning had made him recognize this simple ethic of a moneyed world.

Boldly entering the store, he examined its stock. Here were some things he wanted, others capable of ready adaption to what he desired. Different cultures evolved differing modes of manufacture. Conventional jobs would need alteration to become conventional according to his other-worldly notions, but the simplest tools would enable him to deal with these. Making a list of his requirements, he prowled around until it was complete, handed it to a salesman.

The latter, a shrewd individual, looked the list over, said sharply, "This stuff is for microwave radiation."

"I know it," said Harold blandly.

"It is not for sale to the public except on production of an official permit," he went on. Then, stiffly, "Have you such a permit? May I see your identity card?"

Harold showed him the card.

"Ah!" mouthed the salesman, his manner changing, "the police!" His laugh was apologetic and forced. "Well, you didn't catch me disregarding regulations!"

"I'm not trying to catch you. I've come to get some necessary equipment. Pack it up and let me have it. I'm on urgent business and in a hurry."

"Certainly, certainly." Bustling to and fro, anxious to placate, the salesman collected the equipment, packaged it. Then he made careful note of the name and number on Harold's identity card "We charge this to the Police Department, as usual?"

"No," Harold contradicted. "Charge it to the Analysis Division of the Immigration Department, Stage Three."

He had a satisfied smile as he went out. When the Bearded One got the bill he could stick it in his analyzer and watch the meters whirl. Which reminded him now that he came to think of it—there didn't seem to be an overmuch sense of humor on this world.

Safely back in the Lingans' apartment, he unloaded his loot, got started on it. His hosts were out. He kept the door locked, concentrated on his task and progressed with speed and dexterity which would have astounded his former captors. When he'd been at work an hour the set in the corner chimed urgently, but he ignored it and was still engrossed in his task when the Lingans came in some time later.

Carefully closing and fastening the door, Melor said, "Well, they've got worried about you again."

"Have they?"

"Didn't you catch the recent broadcast?"

"I was too busy," explained Harold.

"They've discovered that you've got a police card and not the card they first announced. They broadcast a correction and a further warning. The announcer was somewhat annoyed."

"So'd I be," said Harold, "if I were Sourpuss."

Melor's eyes, which had been staring absently at the litter of stuff on which Harold was working, suddenly realized what they saw.

"Hey, where did you get all that?" he asked, with alarm. "Have you been outdoors?"

"Sure! I had to get this junk somehow or other and I couldn't think of how to get it any other way. I couldn't wish it into existence. We've not progressed quite *that* far—yet!" He glanced at the uneasy Lingan. "Take it easy. There's nothing to worry about. I was out for less than a couple of hours, and I might have been born and bred in this city for all the notice anyone took of me."

"Maybe so." Melor flopped into a chair, massaged his scaly chin. Ripples of underlying blueness ran through it as his skin moved. "But if you do it too often you'll meet a cop, or a spaceman, or a Drane. Cops are too inquisitive. Spacemen recognize outsiders and rarely forget a face. Dranes know too much and can divine too much. It's risky." He looked again at the litter of apparatus. "What're you making, anyway?"

"A simple contactor."

"What's that for?"

"Making contact with someone else." Harold wangled an electric iron into the heart of the mess, deftly inserted a condenser smaller than a button, linked it into the circuit with two dabs of solder. "If two people, uncertain of each other's whereabouts, are seeking each other within the limits of the same horizon, they can trace each other with contactors."

"I see," said Melor, not seeing at all. "Why not make mental contact?"

"Because the telepathic range is far too short. Thoughts fade swiftly within distance, especially when blanketed by obstacles."

The three were still watching him curiously when he finished the job shortly before midnight. Now he had a small transmitter-receiver fitted with three antennae, one being a short, vertical rod, the second a tiny silver loop rotatable through its horizontal plane, the third a short silver tube, slightly curved, also rotatable horizontally.

"Now to tune it up," he told them.

Connecting the set-up to the power supplies, he let it warm through before he started tuning it with a glassite screwdriver. It was a tricky job. The oscillatory circuit had to be steered a delicate margin past peak so that it would swing dead on to resonance when hand-capacity was removed. And, strangely enough, hand-capacity was greater on this planet. The correct margin had to be discovered by trial and error, by delicate adjustment and readjustment.

He manipulated the tuning with fingers as firm and sensitive as any surgeon's. His jawbone ached. Tuning the set onward, he took his hand away. The circuit swung short. He tried again and again. Eventually he stood away from the apparatus, rubbed his aching jaw in which dull pain was throbbing, switched off the power.

"That'll do," he remarked.

"Aren't you going to use it now?" Melor inquired.

"I can't. Nobody's looking for me yet."

"Oh!" The trio were more puzzled than ever. They gave it up and went to bed.

Putting away his apparatus, Harold dug a book on ancient history out of the Lingans' small but excellent library, settled himself down to the fourth successive night of self-education. There was dynamite in these books for those who had eyes to see. No Lord of Terror had seen them in the light in which he saw them!

The ninth day dawned in manner no different from any other. The sun came up and the Empire's boss city stirred to officially conducted life.

When Melor appeared, Harold said to him, "I believe that this is your free day. Have you any plans for it?"

"Nothing important. Why?"

"The fun starts today, or ought to start if my calculations are correct. I could do with your help."

"In what way?"

"You're going to be mighty useful if I come up against someone who can control his thoughts or shield them entirely. Hatred or animosity aren't thoughts—they're emotions of which antagonistic thoughts are born. You Lingans respond to such emotions. You can go on reading the heart long after the mind is closed to me."

"I get the point but not the purpose," confessed Melor.

"Look," said Harold patiently, "when I say the fun starts I don't mean that there's going to be wholesale violence. We've found better ways. It's possible, for instance, to talk oneself into anything or out of anything provided one says the right things to the right person at the right time. The waving blade hasn't half the potency of the wagging tongue. And the tongue isn't messy." He smiled grimly. "My people have had more than their fill of messy methods. We don't bother with them these days. We're grown up."

"So?" prompted Melor.

"So I need you to tell me how I'm doing if, mayhap, I'm working on someone with a closed mind."

"That's easy. I could tell you when hatred, fear or friendliness intensifies or lessens by one degree."

"Just what I need," enthused Harold. "My form of life has its shortcomings as well as its talents, and we don't let ourselves forget it. Last time some of us forgot it, the forgetters thought themselves a collective form of God. The delusion bred death!"

His tongue gently explored a back tooth as his gaze went to the transmitter-receiver waiting at one side of the room.

Nothing happened until midday. The two kept company through the morning, the fugitive expectant and alert, his host uneasy and silently speculative. At noon the television set chimed and Melor switched it on.

Helman came on the screen. He stared straight at the watching pair in manner suggesting that he saw them as clearly as they saw him. His dark features were surly.

"This is a personal broadcast for the benefit of the specimen known at Harold Harold-Myra," Helman enunciated, "or to any citizen illegally maintaining contact with him. Be it known, Harold Harold-Myra, that a summary of all the available data on your world type has been laid before the Council of Action, which Council, after due consideration thereof, has decided that it is to the essential interest of the Empire that your life form be exterminated with the minimum of delay. By midday tomorrow an order will be sent to appropriate war vessels requiring them to vaporize your native planet—unless, in the meantime, you have surrendered yourself and provided new evidence which may persuade the Council of Action to reconsider its decision."

Helman stopped, licked his lips. His air was that of one still nursing a severe reprimand.

He went on, "This notification will be rebroadcast in one hour's time. Watchers in touch with the fugitive are advised to bring it to his attention as this will be the last warning." His surliness increased as he finished, "In the event of his prompt surrender, the Council of Action will extend gracious pardon to those who have been harboring this specimen."

The screen blanked.

"Mate in one move," said Melor glumly. "We told you that it was a waste of time to sit and plot. They get 'em all, one way or another.

"It's check—and your move."

"All right then—what's your move?"

"I don't know yet. We've still got to wait. If you sit by the chimney long enough, Santa Claus comes down."

"In the name of the Blue Sun, who is Santa Claus?" asked Melor peevishly.

"The man with a million lollies."

"Lollies?"

"Things you lick."

"Oh, cosmos!" said Melor. "What madman wants to own a million things to lick? Is this anything to do with your sermon about wagging tongues? If so, *we're* licked!"

"Forget it," Harold advised. "I talk in riddles to pass the time."

A pain suddenly pulsed in his jawbone. It brought an exclamation from him which stirred the nervous Melor. Putting two fingers into his mouth, Harold unscrewed the crown of a back molar, took it out, put it on the table. A tiny splinter of crystal glittered within the base of the crown. The crystal was fluorescent. Melor gaped at it fascinatedly.

Swiftly powering the transmitter-receiver, Harold let it warm up.

A faint, high-pitched whistle crept into its little phone. He swung the loop slowly while the whistle strengthened, then weakened, finally faded out. Slightly offsetting the loop to bring back the signal, he pressed a stud. The note grew stronger.

"That side," he murmured, indicating the face of the loop nearest to the watching Melor.

Returning the loop to fade-out position, he switched in the transmitter, swung its curved tube antenna until it paralleled the direction faced by the receiver's loop. Again he offset the loop, and the signal returned. He waited expectantly. In a little while, the signal broke into three short pips then resumed its steady note. He flipped his transmitter switch three times.

For half an hour the two sat and waited while the whistle maintained itself and gave triple pips at regular intervals. Then, suddenly, it soared up in power and gave one pip.

Carefully, Harold repeated all the rigmarole with the antenna, this time obtaining a different direction. Three pips came as his reward, and again he switched his transmitter in acknowledgment. Another long wait. Then, slowly, weakly and distantly, a voice crept into his mind.

"A blue car. A blue car."

Going to the window, he looked down into the street. From his height of ten floors he had a clear view extending several blocks in both directions. He found a score of automobiles on the street, half a dozen of them blue.

"Stop, step out, get in again," he thought. He repeated the mental impulse, driving it outward with maximum intensity.

A car stopped, a human shape got out, looked around, stepped back into the vehicle. It was a blue car.

Harold crossed the room, disconnected the contactor, and returned to the window. Looking downward, he thought powerfully.

"I believe I've got you. Drive on slowly . . . slowly . . . here you are . . . stop there! The building immediately on your right. Ten floors up."

He continued to keep watch as the car pulled in by the opposite sidewalk. Two men emerged from it, crossed the road with casual nonchalance, disappeared beneath him. No other cars halted, nobody followed the men into the building.

A voice reached him strongly, *"Are we dragging anything?"*

"Not that I can see."

"Good!"

Melor said plaintively, "I know that you're communicating with someone. Santa Claus, I presume? How you can read each other's toothache is a mystery to me."

"Our throbs are no worse than your wobbles."

"You bounce around," said Melor, "and, according to you, we dither. Some day we'll come across some other life form which spins around in circles, like a mental dervish. Or even an entity capable of logical reasoning without thought at all; a sort of Bohr-thinker who skips straight from premise to conclusion without covering the intervening distance." His eyes found the crystal still on the table, noted that it had ceased to glow. "Better plant your key-frequency back in your face before somebody sets it in a ring."

Harold smiled, took up the crystal, screwed it back into place. Opening the door, he looked out just as the pair from the car arrived on the landing. He beckoned them in, locked the door behind them, introduced them to the Lingan.

"This is Melor, a friend from Linga. Melor, meet George Richard-Eve and Burt Ken-Claudette."

Melor looked askance at the newcomers' neat space uniforms and the silver comet insignia glittering on their epaulettes. He commented, "Well, they smell as good as they look bad. You'll produce a pally Drane next!"

"Not likely!" Harold assured.

Burt sat down, said to Harold, "You know the locals by now. Are they crafty enough to have drawn a bead on that transmission and, if so, how long d'you think they'll give us? If time's short, we can beat it in the car and delay matters a little."

"They know how I got the stuff, where I got it, and its purpose, and they're not too dopey to listen out," Harold replied. "As I guess, I give them half an hour."

"That'll do."

Melor put in, "Talk mentally if it suits you better. I don't mind."

"You're in this," Harold told him, "so we'll talk vocally. You're entitled to listen." He turned to Burt. "What's cooking?"

"There's fun and games on four out of the five. The fifth proved useless for our purpose: it held nothing but a few time-serving bureaucrats on high pay. But four should do, I reckon."

"Go on."

"All the appointed ones have gone beyond and the first of them ought to have reached their destinations by now. It's six days to the nearest system, so they've a good margin." He smoothed his dark hair, looked reminiscent. "*Nemo* is due to pop off any moment now. That was a tough job! We took forty people off it, but had to scour the place from end to end to find the last pair of them. We got 'em, though. They've been dumped in safety."

"Good!"

"This has been an education," Burt went on. "Better than going to the zoo. There's an underground message system on number three, for instance, which has to be seen to be believed. By 'underground' they mean ten thousand feet up! How d'you think they do it?"

"I've no idea," said Harold.

"With birds! Among the minority life forms there is one which is beaked and feathered. They talk with birds. They chirrup and squawk at them, and every bird understands what's said."

"Orniths," informed Melor. "They came originally from Gronat, the Empire's eight hundredth conquest. They're scattered around and there are a few of them here, maybe a dozen or so. When you've had time to tour the Empire you'll find it contains even stranger forms. And the humanoids don't even dislike them all."

"It would seem that the humanoids don't even like each other much," Burt commented. "To most of them, a brother from a neighboring planet is a foreigner."

"Still in the schoolkid stage," said Harold. "Rah-rah and all that."

Burt nodded and continued, "As you know, we've had to move too fast in too little time to put over anything really drastic, but what's been done ought to be enough to show what could be done—which is all that matters." A faraway look came into his eyes. "When we triumphantly cast our bread upon the waters we little thought it'd come back—all wet."

"So you've found confirmation of that?"

"Plenty," Burt replied. "Have you?"

"Any amount of it." Harold went to the bookshelf, selected a heavy tome titled "The Imperial Elect." He skimmed through its pages, found an illustration, showed it to Burt. "Look!"

"Phew!" said Burt.

"The Budding Cross," breathed George, looking over Burt's shoulder. "And the Circle of Infinity!"

"That shelf is crammed with stuff," Harold told them as he replaced the book, "I've been going through it like a man in a strange dream." He came back, sat down. "Anything more to report?"

"Not much. Jon has stayed on number three. He had a stroke of luck and got at the Lord, a fat personage named Amilcare. Temporarily, His Eminence doesn't know which shoe is on which foot."

Harold opened his mouth to comment, closed it without saying anything. His mental perception perked up, listened intently. Burt and George listened likewise. Melor began to fidget. For the first time, Harold noticed that a fringe of fine hairs lay along the rims of the Lingan's ears, and that these hairs were now fully extended and quivering.

"There's a stink of hostility," complained Melor uneasily. In his lithe, loose-jointed gait, he went to the window.

A hubbub lay across the ether, a confused mixture of thoughts from which it was impossible to extract more than odd, disjointed phrases.

"Line 'em across that end . . . rumble, rumble . . . yes, take the ground floor . . . rumble, buzz, buzz . . . work upward . . . rumble . . . ten of you . . . look out for . . . rumble . . . they may be . . ."

"I expect visitors," remarked George, easily. He joined Melor at the window.

The others followed, and the four looked down at the street. It was a hive of activity. A dozen cars were drawn across one end, blocking it completely. Another dozen jockeyed for position to block the opposite end. Cars plugged the three side streets in between. Something invisible droned steadily overhead; it sounded like a squadron of helicopters. More than two hundred black-uniformed men were scattered along the sidewalk in little groups.

"Their bearings must have been rough." Burt pulled a face at the cohort below. "It got them this section of the street but not the building. I'd be ashamed of such a sloppy job."

"It's good enough," Harold answered. He filtered the telepathic surge once again. It was entirely human, involuntary and nonreceptive. "We could go down and save them some bother, but I'm a bit curious about those butterfly minds down there. Surely they'd have brought something potent along with them."

"Test it," suggested Burt.

Dropping their mental shields, the three let their thoughts flow forth bearing a perfect picture of their location. Instantly the hubbub was overwhelmed by an alien mind which imposed itself upon the ether. It was clear, sharp, penetrating, and of remarkable strength.

"They're in that building there! Ten floors high! Three of them and a Lingan. They contemplate no resistance!"

"A Drane!" said Harold.

It was impossible to locate the creature amid the mass of men and automobiles beneath, neither could he sense its general direction for, having said all it considered essential, it had closed its mind and its powerful impulse was gone.

"Judging by the throb, there was a Drane down there," offered Melor belatedly. "Did you hear it? I couldn't understand what it said."

"It got us fixed. It identified your erratic thought-flow and said that a Lingan was with us."

"And what are we going to do about it? Do we stand like sheep and wait to be taken away?"

"Yes," Harold informed.

Melor's face registered approaching martyrdom, but he offered no further remark.

There wasn't an immediate response to the Drane's revelation. For reasons unknown to the watchers, a short time-lag intervened. It ended when a car roared along the street with a silver-spangled official bawling orders from its side window. As one man, the uniformed clusters made a determined rush for the front entrance of the building.

It was Melor who opened the door and admitted a police captain and six men. All seven wore the strained expressions of people called upon to deal with things unimaginable, and all seven were armed. Little blasters, similar to the one Harold had found so objectionable, were ready in their hands.

The captain, a big, burly man, but pale of face, entered the room with his blaster held forward, and gabbled hastily through his prepared speech.

"Listen to me, you four, before you try any tricks. We've reversed the controls on these guns. They stay safe while they're gripped but go off immediately our hands loosen—and hypnosis causes involuntary relaxation of the muscles which you can't prevent!" He swallowed hard. "Any clever stunts will do no more than turn this place into a shambles. In addition, there are more men outside, more on every floor, more in the street. You can't cope with the lot!"

Smiling amiably, Harold said, "You tempt us to persuade you to toss those toys out of the window, and your pants after them. But we want to talk to the Council of Action and have no time for amusement. Let's go."

The captain didn't know whether to scowl or look relieved. Cautiously he stood to one side, his gun held level, as the four filed out through the door. The escorts were equally leery. They surrounded the quartet, but not too closely, bearing themselves with the air of men compelled to nurse vipers to their bosoms.

As they marched along the landing toward the levitators Burt nudged the nearest guard and demanded, "What's your name?"

The fellow, a lanky, beetle-browed individual, was startled and apprehensive as he answered, "Walt Bron."

"Tut!" said Burt.

The guard didn't like that *"tut."* His brows came down, his small eyes held a stupefied expression as his mind said to itself, *"Why should he want my name? Why pick on me? I ain't done him any harm. What's he up to now?"*

Burt smiled broadly and his own mind reached out to George's and Harold's, saying, *"Something has got them worried, though the higher-ups aren't likely to have told them much."*

"Yes—it looks as if there's irritation in influential circles and the cops got bawled out in consequence. Evidently news is coming through." Pause. *"Did you feel any probe?"*

"No."

"Neither did we. That Drane must have gone." Pause. *"Pity we can't talk with Melor this way. He's walking behind like a fatalist pacing to certain death."* Pause. *"Got plenty of guts, the way he's taken us on trust."*

"Yes—but we'll look after him!"

They reached the levitators. The entire landing was now solid with armed police and a number of them were pressing eagerly into the deserted apartment, intent on thorough search.

Herded into a levitator, the captured quartet and their escort of seven crammed it to capacity. The glassite doors slid shut. The burly captain pressed a button and the levitator soared smoothly upward while its occupants watched the rising indicator with offhand interest. They stopped at the twenty-seventh floor.

The captain didn't permit the doors to open. He stood with his attention fixed upon the indicator while slowly his beefy face changed color. Suddenly, he rammed his big thumb on the ground-level button and the levitator shot downward.

Harold: *"Who did that?"*

Burt: *"Me. I couldn't resist it."* Then, vocally, and loudly, "I didn't notice any guns go off. Did you?"

The other captives grinned. The captain glared at the up-flying shaft but said nothing. The escort's uneasiness registered more openly on their faces.

A veritable guard of honor had lined up between the front entrance and the waiting car. About sixty guns were held in readiness on either side—in flat disregard of the fact that one had only to start something and let the fire of one rank bring down half the opposite rank, thus providing plentiful company in death.

The four got into the car, and its driver, a thin featured, pessimistic individual, looked even less happy for their arrival. He had a cop for company in front. The car blew its jets and started off with half a dozen cars leading and a full dozen following. It was a cavalcade worthy of the year's best burial, and its pace was suitably funereal as it wended its way through a succession of side streets to the outskirts of the city. A thousand feet above them a helicopter and two gyros drifted along, carefully following every bend and turn on their route.

The destination proved to be an immense, needlelike skyscraper, tall, slender, graceful. It soared majestically from spacious, well-tended grounds around which stood a high wall surmounted by the spidery wiring of a photoelectric telltale system. As they swept through the great gateway, the prisoners caught a glimpse of the telltale markerboard in the granite lodge and a group of heavily armed guards lounging behind the gates.

"The palace of the Council," Melor informed. "This is where they make worlds and break them—or so they claim."

"Be quiet!" snapped the cop in front. Then, in a high, squeaky voice, he added, "There are fairies at the bottom of my garden!"

"Indeed?" said Burt, affecting polite surprise.

The cop's sour face whitened. His grip tightened on his blaster, forgetting in his emotion that a stronger hold was supposed to be ineffective.

"Let him alone, Burt!" thought Harold.

"I don't like him," Burt came back. *"His ears stick out."*

"How he smells of fury!" criticized Melor, openly.

Conversation ended as the procession halted in front of the skyscraper's ornate entrance. The quartet climbed out, paraded through another wary guard of honor, entered the building. Here, more black-uniformed men conducted them two levels below ground, ushered them into an apartment which, ominously, had a beryllium-steel grille in lieu of a door. The last man out turned a monster key in the grille and departed.

Before the inmates had time thoroughly to examine their new prison, an attendant appeared, thrust packaged foods through the bars of the grille, and told them, "I haven't got the key and don't know who has. Neither can I find out. If you want anything, call for me, but don't think you can make me open up. I couldn't do it even if I wanted —which I don't!"

"Dear me," said Burt, "that's unkind of you." Going to the grille, he swung it open, looked out at the astounded attendant and continued, "Tell the Council that we are very comfortable and appreciate their forethought. We shall be pleased to call upon them shortly."

The attendant's scattered wits came together. He took to his heels as if the breath of death was on his neck.

"How did you do that?" demanded Melor, his eyes wide. He ambled loose-jointedly to the grille, looked at its lock, swung it to and fro on its hinges.

"The gentleman with the key locked it, then unlocked it, and wandered away satisfied that duty had been done," Burt released a sigh. "Life is full of delusions." Opening a packet, he examined its contents. "Calorbix!" he said disgustedly, and tossed the package on a table.

"Here they come," George announced.

A horde arrived. They locked the grille, put two heavy chains around its end post, padlocked those. The four watched in amused silence. A pompous little man, with much silver braid strewn over his chest, then tried the grille, shaking it furiously. Satisfied, he scowled at the four, went away, the horde following.

Burt mooched restlessly around the room. "There are scanners watching us, microphones listening to us and, for all I know, some cockeyed gadget tasting us. I'm fed up with this. Let's go see the Council."

"Yes, it's about time we did," George agreed.

"The sooner the better," added Harold.

Melor offered no comment. The conversation of his friends, he decided, was oft confusing and seemingly illogical. They had a habit of going off at the queerest slants. So he contented himself with staring at the grille through which nothing but some liquid form of life could pass, while he wondered whether Tor and Vern had yet been dragged into the net. He hoped not. It was better to execute one Lingan than three.

A minute later the man with the keys came back accompanied by two guards and a tall, gray-haired official clad in myrtle green. The badge of the Silver Comet glittered on the latter's shoulder straps. His keen gaze rested on the warden as that worthy surlily unlocked the padlocks, withdrew the chains, freed the grille.

Then he said to the four, "Most remarkable!" He waited for a response, but none came, so he carried on. "This warder hasn't the least notion of what he's doing. As the Council expected, you influenced him to return and unlock the gate. We kept him under observation. It has been an interesting demonstration of what hypnosis can achieve." His smile was amiable. "But you didn't expect him to return accompanied, eh?"

"What does it matter?" Harold answered. "Your brain advertises that the Council is ready to deal with us."

"I waste my breath talking." The official made a gesture of futility. "All right. Come with me."

The Council looked small. Its strength a mere eight, all but two of them human. They sat at a long table, the six humans in the middle, a nonhuman at each end. The thing on the extreme right had a head like a purple globe, smooth, shining, hairless, possessing no features except a pair of retractable eyes. Below was a cloaked shapelessness suggesting no shoulders and no arms. It was as repulsive as the sample on the left was beautiful. The one on the left had a flat, circular, golden face surrounded by golden petals, large and glossy. The head was supported by a short, fibrous green neck from the knot of which depended long, delicate arms terminating in five tentacles. Two black-knobbed stamens jutted from the face, and a wide, mobile mouth was visible beneath them. It was lovely, like a flower.

Between this table and the staring captives hung a barrier of wire. Harold, Burt and George could *see* that it was loaded, and their perceptions examined it gingerly. They diagnosed its purpose simultaneously: it bore an alternating current imposed upon a pulsing potential. Two hundred cycles per second, with a minimum pressure of four thousand volts rising to peak points of seven thousand every tenth cycle.

"Hypnocast jammer!" reported Burt. He was puzzled. "But

that doesn't blank neural sprays. They're different bands. Can you hear what they're thinking?"

"Not a thing," answered Harold. "Neither could I get your thoughts while you were speaking."

"I've lost contact, too," put in George. "Something which isn't that screen is droning out a bass beat note that makes a mess of the telepathic band."

Sniffing with distaste, Melor said, "This is where I come in. I know what's the matter. There's a Drane in the room. He's doing it."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I can sense him." He pointed at the flowerlike being on the left. "Furthermore, Dranes can't speak. They've no vocal cords. The Florans function as their interpreters—that's why this one's here."

One of the humans on the Council, a bull-headed, heavily jowled man, leaned forward, fixed glittering eyes on the four. His voice was harsh.

"The Lingan is right. Since we are not assembled to be entertained by your alien antics, nor to listen to your lies, but solely for the purpose of weighing fresh truths with justice and with wisdom, we find it necessary to employ a Drane."

So saying, he made a dramatic gesture. The Floran reached a tentacled hand down behind the table, lifted the hidden Drane, placed it on the polished surface.

Mental visualization, Harold realized, had proved correct with regard to shape and appearance but had misled him in the matter of size. He'd taken it for granted that a Drane possessed bulk comparable with his own. But this creature was no larger than his fist. Its very smallness shocked him.

It was lizardlike, but not so completely as first appeared, and now that he could see it closely, its tiny but perfect uniform looked absurd. While they regarded it, the thing sat there and stared at them with eyes like pin points of flaming crimson, and as it stared the strange beat note disappeared, a psychic flood poured through the screen and lapped around their minds.

But already the three shields were up, while the fourth—the Lingan—felt the force only as an acute throb. The pressure went up and up; it was amazing that such a midget brain could emit so mighty a mental flow of power. It felt and probed and thrust and stabbed, its violence increasing without abate.

Perspiration beaded the features of the trio as they gazed fixedly at the same spot on the Drane's jacket while maintaining their shields against its invisible assault. Melor sat down, cradled his head in his arms, began to rock slowly from side to side. The Council watched impassively. The Drane's optics were jewels of fire.

"Keep it up," whispered Harold. "It's almost on the boil."

Like the lizards it resembled, the Drane's pose was fixed, unmoving. It had remained as motionless as a carved ornament since it had reached the table, and its baleful eyes had never blinked. Still its psychic output went up.

Then, suddenly, it pawed at its jacket, snatched the paw away. A thin whisp of smoke crawled out of the cloth. The next instant, the creature had fled from the table, the mental pressure collapsing as its source disappeared. Its sharp, peaky voice came into their minds as the thing snaked through a tiny door, fled along the outer passage. The voice faded with distance.

"Burning . . . burning . . . burning!"

The Council member who had spoken originally, now sat staring through the screen at the prisoners. His hand was on the table, and his fingers rapped its surface nervously. The other members maintained blank expressions. He turned his head, looked at the Floran.

"What happened?"

"The Drane said he was burning," enunciated the mouth in the flowerlike head. Its tones were weak, but precise. "His mind was very agitated. The peril destroyed his ability to concentrate, and he had to flee lest worse befall."

"Pyrotics!" said the Council member incredulously. "There are legends of such." His attention returned to the captives. "So you're pyrotics—fire-raisers!"

"Some of your people can do it—but don't know it themselves," Harold told him. "They've caused most of any seemingly inexplicable fires you've experienced." He made a gesture of impatience. "Now that we've got rid of that Drane how about giving way to what's on your mind? We can read what is written there, and we know the next move: you're to call Burkinshaw, Helman and Roka, after which the parley will start."

Frowning, but making no retort, the Council member pressed a red button on his desk. His attitude was one of expectancy.

In short time, Helman and Roka entered the room, took seats at the table. The former's bearing was surly and disgruntled. The latter grinned sheepishly at the quartet, even nodded amiably to Harold.

One minute after them, Burkinshaw Three, the Supreme Lord, came in and took the center seat. His awesome name and imposing title fitted him like somebody else's glove, for he was a small, thin man, round-shouldered, narrow-chested, with a pale, lined face. His balding head had wisps of gray hair at the sides, and his eyes peered myopically through rimless pince-nez. His whole appearance was that of a mild and perpetually preoccupied professor—but his mind was cold, cold.

That mind was now wide open to the three. It was a punctilious mind, clear and sharp in form, operating deliberately and calculatingly through the mixed output of the other humans at the Council table.

Arranging some papers before him, and keeping his gaze fixed upon the top sheets, Burkinshaw spoke in measured, unhurried tones, saying, "I don't doubt that you can read my mind and are reading it now, but in justice to the Lingan, who cannot do so, and for the benefit of my fellows who are not telepathic either, I must use ordinary speech." He adjusted the pince-nez, turned over a sheet of paper and continued.

"We, of the Imperial Council of Action, have decided that the safety of the Empire demands that we obliterate the planet known to us as KX-724 together with any adjacent planets, satellites or asteroids harboring its dominant life form. We are now met to consider this life form's final plea for preservation, and it is the duty of each of us to listen carefully to what new evidence may be offered, weighing it not with favor or with prejudice, but with justice."

Having thus spoken, the Supreme Lord removed his pince-nez, polished each lens, clipped them carefully on his nose, stared owlishly over their tops at the prisoners. His eyes were a very pale blue, looked weak, but were not weak.

"Have you chosen your spokesman?"

Their minds conferred swiftly, then Harold said, "I shall speak."

"Very well then." Burkinshaw relaxed in his seat. "Before you commence it is necessary to warn you that our grave decision concerning the fate of your people is neither frivolous nor heartless. In fact, it was reached with the greatest reluctance. We were driven to it by the weight of evidence and, I regret to say, additional data which we've recently gained is of a nature calculated to support our judgment. Bluntly, your kind of life is a menace to our kind. The responsibility now rests with you to prove otherwise—to our satisfaction."

"And if I can't?" queried Harold.

"We shall destroy you utterly."

"If you can," said Harold.

The assembled minds reacted promptly. He could hear them, aggressive and fuming. The purple thing exuded no thoughts but did give out a queer suggestion of imbecilic amusement. The Floran's attitude was one of mild surprise mixed with interest.

Burkinshaw wasn't fazed. "If we can," he agreed blandly, while his brain held little doubt that they could. "Proceed in your own way," he invited. "You have about fourteen hours in which to convince us that our decision was wrong, or impracticable."

"You've tempted us into giving minor demonstrations of our powers," Harold began. "The Drane was planted here for a similar purpose: you used him as a yardstick with which to measure our mental abilities. From your viewpoint, I guess, the results have strengthened your case and weakened ours. Only the yardstick wasn't long enough."

Burkinshaw refused to rise to the bait. Placing his fingertips together as if about to pray, he stared absently at the ceiling, said nothing. His mind was well disciplined, for it registered no more than the comment, *"A negative point."*

"Let it pass," Harold went on, "while I talk about coincidences. On my world, a coincidence is a purely fortuitous lining-up of circumstances and either is isolated or recurs haphazardly. But when a seeming coincidence repeats itself often enough, it ceases to be a coincidence. You know that, too—or ought to know it. For example, let's take the once-alleged coincidence of meteoric phenomena appearing simultaneously with earthquakes. It occurred so frequently that eventally one of your scientists became curious, investigated the matter, discovered solar-dynamic space-strain, the very force which since has been utilized to boost your astrovessels to supra-spatial speeds. The lesson, of course, is that one just can't dismiss coincidences as such when there are too many of them."

"A thrust—toward where?" mused the Floran.

"No point yet apparent," thought Burkinshaw.

"I don't like the way he gabbles," said Helman's mind uneasily. *"He's talking to gain time. Maybe the three of them are trying to push something through that screen. They burned the Drane through it, didn't they?"* He fidgeted in his seat. *"I don't share B's faith in that screen. Curses on Roka and all the rest of the pioneering crowd—they'll be the end of us yet!"*

Smiling to himself, Harold continued, "We've found out that the game of chess is generally known all over the Empire."

"Pshaw!" burst out the harsh-voiced man seated on Burkinshaw's left. "That's no coincidence. It spread from a central source as anyone with a modicum of intelligence should have deduced."

"Be quiet, Dykstra," reproved Burkinshaw.

"Which source?" Harold asked him.

Dykstra looked peeved as he replied, "Us! We spread it around. What of it?"

"We had it long before you contacted us," Harold told him.

Dykstra opened his mouth, glanced at Burkinshaw, closed his mouth and swallowed hard. Burkinshaw continued to survey the ceiling.

Harold pursued, "We've had it so long that we don't know how long. The same board, same pieces, same moves, same rules. If you work it out, you'll find that that involves a very large number of coincidences."

They didn't comment vocally, but he got their reactions.

Four of the Council were confused.

"Surprising, but possible," mused the Floran.

"What of it, anyway?" inquired Dykstra's mind.

"No point yet apparent," thought Burkinshaw coolly.

The purple thing's brain emitted a giggle.

"Bron," said Harold. "Walt Bron, Robertus Bron and umpteen other Brons. Your directory of citizens is full of them. My world, likewise, is full of them, always coupled with the other parent's name, of course, and occasionally spelled Brown, but pronounced the same. We've also got Roberts and Walters." He looked at Helman. "I know four men named Hillman." He shifted his gaze to the Supreme Lord. "And among our minor musicians is one named Theodore Burkinshaw-May."

Burkinshaw removed his stare from the ceiling and concentrated on the wall. *"I see where he's going. Reserve judgment until he arrives."*

"The vessel which brought us here was named the *Fenix,* in characters resembling those of our own alphabet," Harold continued. "And in days long gone by, when we had warships, there was one named the *Phoenix.* We found your language amazingly easy to learn. Why? Because one-fifth of your vocabulary is identical with ours. Another fifth is composed of perversions of our words. The remainder consists of words which you have changed beyond all recognition or words you've acquired from the peoples you've conquered. But, basically, your language is ours. Have you had enough coincidences?"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Dykstra loudly. "Impossible!"

Burkinshaw turned and looked at Dykstra with eyes that were reproving behind their lenses. "Nothing is impossible," he contradicted mildly. "Continue," he ordered Harold, while his thoughts ran on, *"The pleader is making the inevitable point—too late."*

"So you can see where I'm going," Harold remarked to him. "Just for one final coincidence, let me say I was stupid enough to misunderstand the imperial title. I thought they called themselves Lords of Terror. A silly mistake." His voice slowed down. "Their title is a mystic one rooted deep in your past. They call themselves Lords of Terra!"

"Dear me," said Dykstra, "isn't that nice!"

Ignoring him, Harold spoke to Roka. "You're awake by now. Last night something clicked in your mind and you found yourself remembering things you didn't know you'd forgotten. Do you remember what my people call their parent planet?"

"Terra," Roka responded promptly. "I reported it to the Supreme Lord this morning. You call yourselves Terrestrials."

Dykstra's heavy face went dark red, and accusations of blasphemy were welling within his mind when Burkinshaw beat him to it.

"This morning's revised report of Lieutenant Roka and certain survivors of his crew now lies before the Council." He indicated the papers on the table. "It has already been analyzed by the police commissioner, Inquisitor Helman and myself. We now believe that the pleader's assertions are founded in truth and that in discovering KX-724 we have discovered our long-lost point of origin. We have found our mother planet. The *Fenix,* unknown to any of us, was homeward bound!"

Half the Council were dumfounded. The purple creature was not; it registered that human rediscoveries were of little consequence to purple things. The Floran thought similarly. Dykstra's mind was a turmoil of confusion.

"A difference of three light-years has separated us for two thousand centuries," Harold told them quietly. "In that tremendous past we'd grown great and venturesome. We sent several convoys of colonists to the nearest system four and a half light-years away. We never knew what happened to them, for then followed the final atomic war which reduced us to wandering tribes sunk lower than savages. We've been climbing back ever since. The path of our climb has been very different from yours, for roving particles had done strange things to us. Some of those things died out, some were rooted out, others persisted and made us what we are today."

"What are you?" inquired the member next to Roka.

"Humanity metamorphosed," Burkinshaw answered for him.

"In the awful struggle for life on new and hostile worlds, you, too, sank," Harold continued. "But you climbed again, and once more reached for the stars. Naturally, you sought the nearest system one and a half light-years away, for you had forgotten the location of your home which was spoken of only in ancient legends. We were three light-years farther away than your nearest neighboring system. Logically, you picked that—and went away from us. You sank again, climbed again, went on again, and you never came back until you'd built a mighty Empire on the rim of which we waited, and changed, and changed."

Now they were all staring at him fascinatedly. Even Dykstra was silent, his mind full of the mighty argosy across the ages. Half of it was school-book stuff to him, but not when presented in this new light.

"Those of you who are of the Brotherhood of the Budding Cross know that this is true—that you have completed the circle and reached the Seat of Sol." He made a swift and peculiar sign. Two of his audience responded automatically.

"It's of little use," Burt's thought came over strongly. *"They're too factual."*

"Wait!"

The Council was silent a long time, and eventually the Floran said, "All this is very touching—but how touching will it be when they take over our Empire?" To which its mind added, *"And we Florans swap one master for another. I am against it. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't."*

Resting his thin arms on the table, Burkinshaw Three blinked apologetically at the Terrans and spoke smoothly. "If they knew what we know, the Empire's sentimentalists might be against your destruction. However, the fabric of our cosmic edifice cannot be sustained by anything so soft as sentiment. Moreover, the prodigal sons have no intention of presenting this fatted calf to their long-lost fathers. Your removal from the scheme of things appears to me as necessary as ever—perhaps even more necessary—and that it will be patricide makes no difference to the fact." His thin, ascetic face held an ingratiating wish to please. "I feel sure that you understand our position. Have you anything more to say?"

"No luck," whispered Melor. "The hatred has gone—to be replaced by fear."

Harold grimaced, said to the Supreme Lord, "Yes, I'd like to say that you can blast Terra out of existence, and its system along with it, but it'll do you no good."

"We are not under the delusion that it will do us any good," declared Burkinshaw. "Nor would we sanction so drastic an act for such a purpose." He removed his pince-nez, screwed up his eyes as he looked at his listeners. "The motive is more reasonable and more urgent—it is to prevent harm."

"It won't do that, either."

"Why not?"

"Because you're too late."

"I feared you'd say that." Burkinshaw leaned back in his seat, tapped his glasses on a thumbnail. *"If he can't satisfy me that his claim is well-based, I shall advance the hour!"* Then he said, "You'll have to prove that."

"There's trouble on four out of the five other planets in this system. You've just had news of it. Nothing serious, merely some absenteeism, sabotage, demonstrations, but no violence. It's trouble all the same—and it could be worse."

"There's always trouble on one planet or another," put in Helman sourly. "When you're nursing four thousand of them, you get used to unrest."

"You overlook the significance of coincidences, I fear. Normal troubles pop up here and there, haphazardly. These have come together. They've kept an appointment in time!"

"We'll deal with them," Helman snapped.

"I don't doubt it," said Harold evenly. "You'll also deal with an uproar in the next system when you get news of it soon. You'll deal with four planets simultaneously, or forty planets—simultaneously. But four hundred planets—simultaneously—and then four thousand! Somewhere is the number that'll prove too much for even the best of organizations."

"It's not possible," Helman asserted stubbornly. "Only two dozen of you Terrans got here. Roka told us that. You took over his ship, substituted two dozen Terrestrials for part of his crew, impressed false memories on his and the others' minds causing them to suspect nothing until their true memories suddenly returned." He scowled. The pulse in his forehead was beating visibly. "Very clever of you. Very, very clever. But twenty-four aren't enough."

"We know it. Irrespective of relative powers, some numbers are needed to deal with numbers." Harold's sharp-eyed gaze went from Helman to Burkinshaw. "If you people are no more and no less human than you were two hundred thousand years ago—and I think that your expansive path *has* kept you much the same—I'd say that your bureaucrats still live in water-tight compartments. So long as supposedly missing ships fail to observe the officially prescribed rigmarole for reporting, it's taken that they're still missing. And, ten to one, your Department of Commerce doesn't even know that the Navy has mislaid anything."

It was a tribute to the Supreme Lord's quick-wittedness that his mind was way ahead of his confreres', for he acted while they were still stewing it over. He switched on the televisor set in the wall on one side.

Looking at its scanner, he said sharply, "Get me the Department of Commerce, Movements Section."

The screen colored, a fat man in civilian attire appeared. An expression of intense respect covered his ample features as he identified his caller.

"Yes, your excellency?"

"The Navy has reported two vessels immobilized beyond the Frontier. They're the *Callan* and the *Mathra.* Have they been recorded recently in any movements bulletins?"

"A moment, your excellency." The fat man disappeared. After some time, he came back, a puzzled frown on his face. "Your excellency, we have those two ships recorded as obsolete war vessels functioning as freighters. Their conversion was assumed by us, since they are transporting passengers and tonnage. The *Callan* has cleared four ports in the Frontier Zone, Sector B, in the last eight days. The *Mathra* departed from the system of Hyperion after landing passengers and freight on each of its nine planets. Its destination was given as external to the Frontier Zone, Sector-J."

"Inform the Navy Department," Burkinshaw ordered, and switched off. He was the least disturbed individual at the table. His manner was calm, unruffled as he spoke to Harold. "So they're busily bringing in Terrans or Terrestrials or whatever you call yourselves.

The logical play is to have those two vessels blown out of existence. Can it be done?"

"I'm afraid not. It depends largely upon whether the ships getting such an order have or have not already come under our control. The trouble with warships and atom bombs and planet-wreckers is that they're useful only when they work when and where you want them to work. Otherwise, they're liabilities." He gestured to indicate Burt and George. "According to my friends, the bomb allocated to Terra is on the ship *Warcat* clearing from your third neighbor. Ask Amilcare about it."

It required some minutes to get the third planet's Lord on the screen, and then his image was cloudy with static.

"Where's the *Warcat?"* rasped Burkinshaw.

The image moved, clouded still more, then cleared slightly. "Gone," said Amilcare jovially. "I don't know where."

"On whose authority?"

"Mine," Amilcare answered. His chuckle was oily and a little crazy. "Jon wanted it so I told him to take it. I couldn't think of anything you'd find more gratifying. Don't you worry about Jon—I'm looking after him for you."

Burkinshaw cut him off. "This Jon is a Terran, I suppose?"

"A Terrestrial," Harold corrected.

"Put a call out for him," urged Dykstra irefully. "The police won't all be bereft of their senses even if Amilcare is."

"Let me handle this," Burkinshaw said. Then, to Harold, "What has he done with the *Warcat?"*

"He'll have put somebody on it to control the crew and they'll be giving you a demonstration of what a nuisance planet-wreckers can be when they drop where they shouldn't."

"So your defense is attack? The bloodshed has started? In that case, the war is on, and we're all wasting our—"

"There will be no bloodshed," Harold interrupted. "We're not so infantile as that. None's been shed so far, and none will be shed if it can be avoided. That's what we're here for—to avoid it. The fact that we'd inevitably win any knock-down and drag-out affair you care to start hasn't blinded us to the fact that losers can lose very bloodily." He waved a hand toward the televisor. "Check up with your watertight bureaucrats. Ask your astronomers whether that refueling asteroid of yours is still circling."

Burkinshaw resorted to the televisor for the third time. All eyes were on its screen as he said, "Where is *Nemo* now?"

"*Nemo?* Well, your excellency, at the present moment it is approaching alignment with the last planet *Drufa* and about twenty hours farther out."

"I'm not asking where it ought to be! I want to know whether it's actually there!"

"Pardon me, your excellency." The figure slid off the screen and was gone a long time. When it returned, its voice crept out of the speaker hushed and frightened. "Your excellency, it would seem that some strange disaster has overtaken the body. I cannot explain why we've failed to observe—"

"Is it there?" rapped Burkinshaw impatiently.

"Yes, your excellency. But it is in gaseous condition. One would almost believe that a planet-wrecker had—"

"Enough!" Without waiting to hear the rest, he switched off.

Lying back in his chair, he brooded in complete disregard of the fact that his mind was wide open to some even though not to all. He didn't care who picked up his impressions.

"We may be too late. Possibly we were already too late the day Roka came back. At long last we've fallen into the trap we've always feared, the trap we avoided when we vaporized that world of parasites. Nevertheless, we can still destroy Terra—they can't possibly have taken over every world and every ship and we can still wipe her out. But to what avail? Revenge is sweet only when it's profitable. Will it profit us? It all depends on how many of these people have sneaked into our ranks, and how many more can get in before we destroy their base."

Helman thought, *"This is it! Any fool could tell it had to come sooner or later. Every new world is a risk. We've been lucky to get through four thousand of them without getting in bad. Well, the end could have been worse. At least, these are our own kind and should favor us above all other shapes."*

Melor murmured, "Their hate has weakened, and their fear turns to personal worry. Excepting the Purple One and the Floran. The Purple One, who was amused, is now angry. The Floran, who was interested and amiable, now fears."

"That's because we're not of their shape. Racial antagonisms and color antagonisms are as nothing to the mutual distrust between different shapes. There lies the Empire's weak spot. Every shape desires mastery of its own territory. So far as we're concerned, they can have it," Harold commented.

Putting his glasses back on his nose, Burkinshaw sighed and said, "Since you intend to take over the Empire, our only remaining move is to issue a general order for the immediate destruction of Terra. No matter how many confiscated ships try to thwart my purpose, obedience by one loyal vessel will suffice." His hand reached out toward the televisor switch.

"We aren't taking over your Empire," Harold told him swiftly. "Neither do we wish to do so. We're concerned only that you don't take over our world. All we want is a pact of noninterference in each other's affairs, and the appointment of a few Lingans to act as ambassadors through whom we can maintain such contact as suits us. We want to go our own way along our own path, we've the ability to defend our right to do so, and the present situation is our way of demonstrating the fact. No more than that. If, peevishly, you destroy our world, then, vengefully, we shall disrupt your ramshackle collection of worlds, not with our own strength, but by judiciously utilizing yours! Leave us in peace and we shall leave you in peace."

"Where's our guarantee of that?" asked Burkinshaw cynically. "How do we know that a century of incidious penetration will not follow such a pact?" He stared at the four, his blue eyes shrewd and calculating to a degree not apparent before. "In dealing with us you've been able to use an advantage you possess which Florans, Lingans, Rethrans and others have not got, namely, you know us as surely as you know your own kith and kin." He bent forward. "Likewise, *we* know *you!* If you're of sound and sane mind you'll absorb gradually what you can't gulp down in one lump. That's the way we acquired the Empire, and that's the way you'll get it!"

"We've proved to you that we can take it over," Harold agreed evenly, "and that is our protection. Your distrust is the measure of ours. You'll never know how many of us are within your Empire and you'll never find out—but obliteration of our parent world will no longer obliterate our life form. We have made our own guarantee. Get it into your head, there is no winner in this game. It's stalemate!" He watched interestedly as Burkinshaw's forefinger rested light on the switch. "You're too late, much too late. We don't want your Empire because we're in the same fix—we're too late."

Burkinshaw's eyes narrowed and he said, "I don't see why it's too late for you to do what you've been so anxious to prove you can do."

"The desire doesn't exist. We've greater desires. It's because we have wended our way through a hell of our own creation that we have changed, and our ambitions have changed with us. Why should we care about territorial conquests when we face prospects infinitely greater? Why should we gallivant in spaceships around the petty limits of a galaxy when some day we shall range unhampered through infinity? How d'you think we knew you were coming, and prepared for you, even though we were uncertain of your shape and unsure of your intentions?"

"I'm listening," observed Burkinshaw, his fingers still toying with the switch, "but all I hear is words. Despite your many differences from us, which I acknowledge, the ancient law holds good: that shape runs true to shape."

Harold glanced at Burt and George. There was swift communion between them.

Then he said, "Time has been long, and the little angle between the paths of our fathers has opened to a mighty span. Our changes have been violent and many. A world of hard radiation has molded us anew, has made us what you cannot conceive, and you see us in a guise temporarily suitable for our purpose." Without warning, his eyes glowed at the Purple One. "Even that creature, which lives on life force and has been sucking steadily at us all this time, would now be dead had he succeeded in drawing one thin beam of what he craves!"

Burkinshaw didn't bother to look at the purple thing, but commented boredly, "The Rethran was an experiment that failed. If he was of any use, he'd have got you long before now." He rubbed his gray side-hairs, kept his hand on the switch. "I grow tired of meaningless noises. You are now hinting that you are no longer of our shape. I prefer to believe the evidence of my eyes." His optics sought the miniature time-recorder set in a ring on his finger. "If I switch on, it may mean the end of us all, but you cannot hypnotize a scanner, and the scene registered in this room will be equivalent to my unspoken order—death to Terra! I suspect you of playing for time. We can ill afford further time. I give you one minute to prove that you are now as different from us as is this Floran or this Rethran or that Lingan. If you do so, we'll deal with this matter sensibly and make a pact such as you desire. If not"—he waggled the switch suggestively—"the slaughter starts. We may lose—or we may not. It's a chance we've got to take."

The three Terrestrials made no reply. Their minds were in complete accord and their response was simultaneous.

Dykstra sobbed, "Look! Oh, eternity, look!" then sank to his knees and began to gabble. The purple creature withdrew its eyes right into its head so that it could not see. Burkinshaw's hand came away from the switch; his glasses fell to the floor and lay there, shattered, unheeded. Roka and Helman and the other humans on the Council covered their faces with their hands which slowly took on a tropical tan.

Only the Floran came upright. It arose to full height, its golden petals completely extended, its greenish arms trembling with ecstasy.

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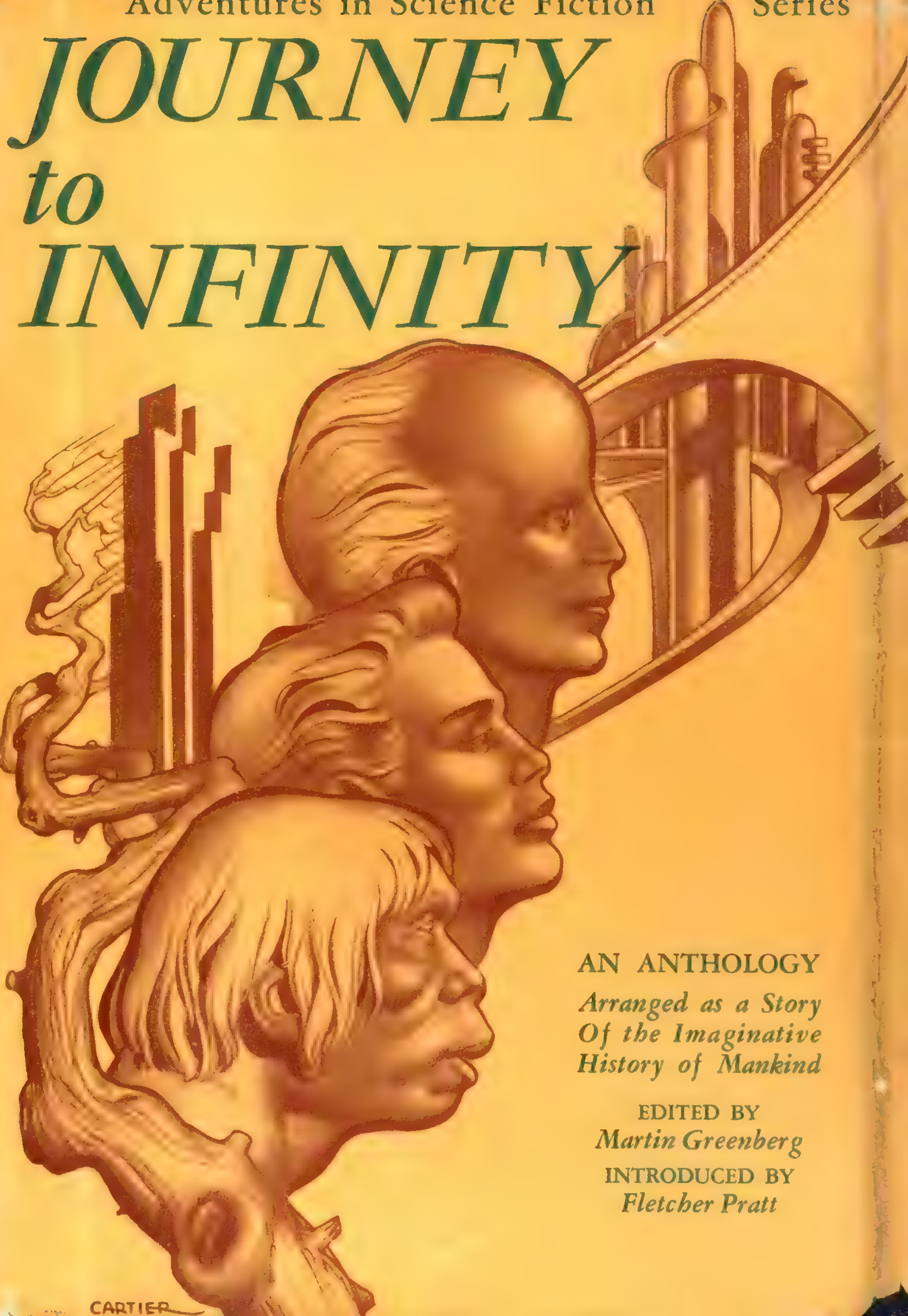

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